MY HAPPY MARRIAGE
AKUMI AGITOGI
3

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MY HAPPY MARRIAGE

3

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Tsukiho Tsukioka

YEN ON
NEW YORK

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AKUMI AGITOGI

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WATASHI NO SHIAWASENA KEKKON Vol.3

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First published in Japan in 2020 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo

through TUTTLE-MORI AGENCY, INC., Tokyo.

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Yen On

150 West 30th Street, 19th Floor

New York, NY 10001

Visit us at yenpress.com facebook.com/yenpress twitter.com/yenpress yenpress.tumblr.com instagram.com/yenpress

First Yen On Edition: November 2022

Edited by Yen On Editorial: Maya Deutsch

Designed by Yen Press Design: Wendy Chan

Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Agitogi, Akumi, author. | Tsukioka, Tsukiho, illustrator. | Piatkowska, Kiki, translator. | Musto, David, translator.

Title: My happy marriage / Akumi Agitogi ; illustration by Tsukiho Tsukioka ; translation by Kiki Piatkowska ; translation by David Musto.

Other titles: Watashi no shiawasena kekkon. English

Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen On, 2021.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021046163 | ISBN 9781975335007 (v. 1 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975335021 (v. 2 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975335045 (v. 3 ; trade paperback)

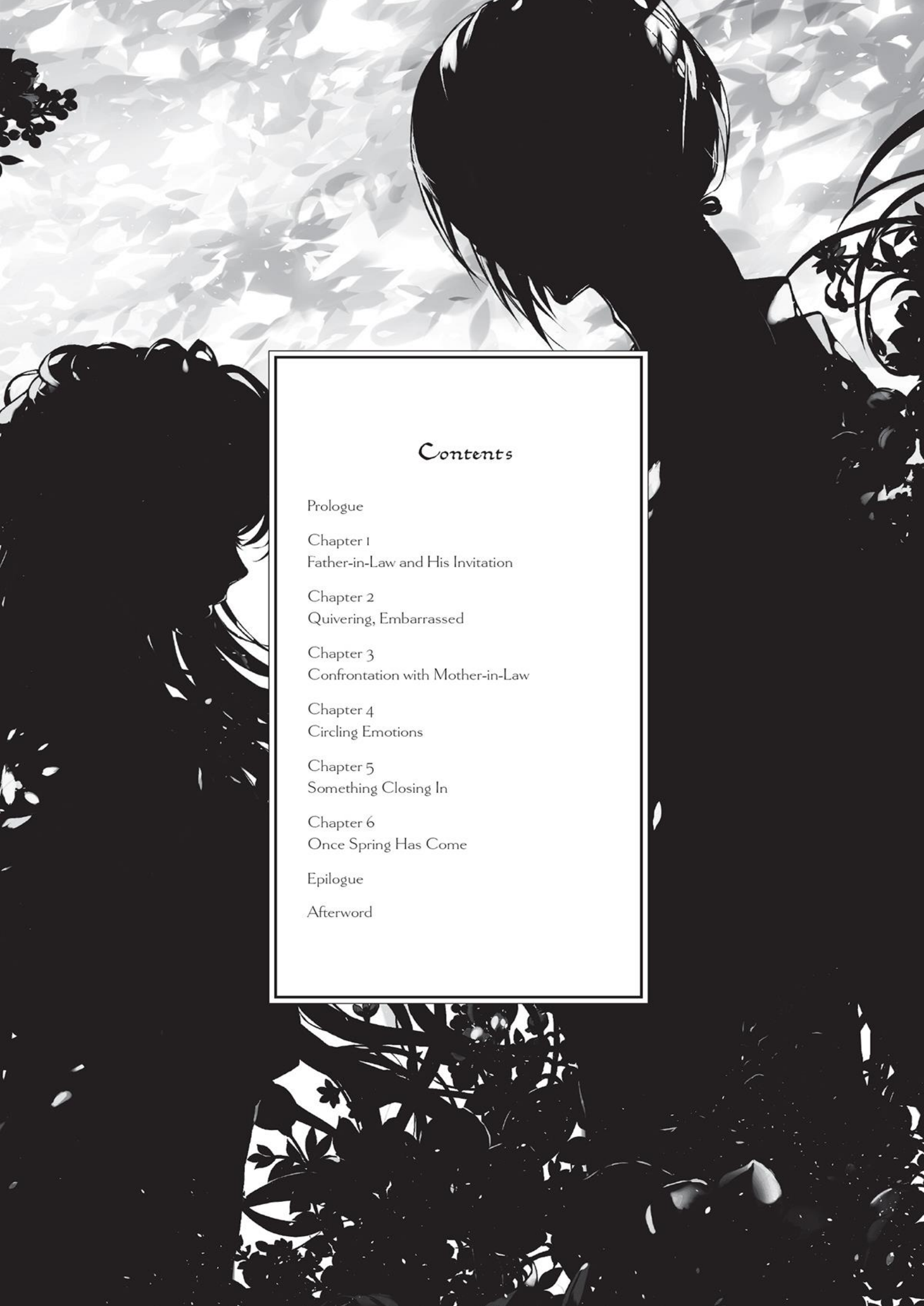
Subjects: CYAC: Arranged marriage—Fiction. | Love—Fiction. | LCGFT: Light novels.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.A3245 My 2021 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2021046163

ISBNs: 978-1-9753-3504-5 (paperback)

978-1-9753-3505-2 (ebook)



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PROLOGUE

Buffeted by the cold autumn wind of night, the man trotted down a mountain trail covered in dead leaves.

He'd lost track of time and had gotten a late start on his trip home. It would take him a bit longer to reach the village.

They say some creeps have been drifting around here, too.

A few villagers claimed to have glimpsed a black-cloaked figure who kept their face hidden roaming around at night.

Though this individual had yet to do anything to anyone or cause a disturbance, their unnerving appearance had set everyone in town on edge.

The man was in his prime and fairly strong, but that didn't make the mysterious figure any less frightening.

Better not get wrapped up in anything freaky.

He wanted nothing more right now than to hurry home, soak in a warm bath, have himself a drink, and hit the hay. Shivering in the night air, he quickened his pace.

All of a sudden, the man stopped in his tracks.

He could have sworn he'd heard a noise nearby. A bit like grass and dry leaves crunching underfoot. It occurred to him that it could have just been his footsteps, but the sound was slightly too far away for that.

Maybe a deer, or a boar… Hope it's not a bear.

Just as he thought to slip away while he was unnoticed, his eyes fell on a silhouette. It clearly didn't belong to any animal—only human beings walked upright on two legs.

Save for the locals, hardly anyone set foot in these mountains. Tourists or people with vacation homes in the area generally didn't venture up this high. And when outsiders did pass through, they stuck out like a sore thumb, so word of their arrival would quickly spread among the locals.

That was exactly what had happened with the current talk of the town, the figure in black.

I've got a bad feeling about this.

What if their presence here brought harm to the village? What if this suspicious individual was involved in some sort of crime?

The man gulped hard then made up his mind before he headed off in the direction of the shadow.

After walking a short distance, he came upon the suspicious figure. A black cloak covered their body from head to toe.

If not for his sharp night vision, the man might have missed them entirely.

Their face is hidden. That's gotta be them…

This was the black-clad figure he'd heard so much about. There was no doubt.

The person in the cloak was descending the mountain, whipping their head back and forth as if they were worried about being seen.

Breathlessly following after them, the man grew puzzled.

The only thing up ahead of them was a run-down shack. It was built on the outskirts of the village a long time ago and had fallen out of use.

Perhaps the building had become a hangout for outlaws.

If that's the case, then I'm really *going to have to check it out, huh.*

Up until now, the villagers hadn't pursued the creepy, shadowy figure very far.

Deep down, the man was scared to pursue them alone. But his sense of responsibility as a member of his community won out over his fear when he considered that this person could get up to even more trouble if he let them be.

He continued tailing after the black-clad figure, keeping plenty of space between him and the stranger to avoid being spotted.

Right as the shack came into view, the man stopped to watch as the figure opened the door.

Oh… So someone else is already inside.

Looking through the open door, he caught a brief glimpse of another black shadow. There were indeed multiple people inhabiting the place.

Should he go up and admonish them?

No, he would be better off hanging back if there was more than one person there. They were obviously a suspicious bunch, and he couldn't say for sure if they were unarmed.

His mind set on returning to the village to inform everyone of this development, the man turned around. That was when he saw it.

A giant shadow, lurking there in utter silence to avoid giving its presence away.

It was over nine forearms tall and similarly broad across. It was looking down ponderously at the man. The moment their eyes met, a grating and unpleasant screech, like the grinding of teeth, assaulted the man's ears.

It was dressed in the same large black cloak as the suspicious figure from earlier.

But this was no human. The man was viscerally confident of that.

Horrible. Horrible. Horrible.

It felt like a frigid hand had grabbed his heart. His spine stiffened, and his teeth chattered. The man retreated backward, but in his panic, he fell on his backside.

The shadow drew closer, letting out a sharp, grating sound all the while… Now that he had a better view of the creature, the man saw that it had two large, thick horns growing out of its head.

"A-aaaauuuugh!"

Unable to hold back his scream, the man lost consciousness.

⚜ *CHAPTER 1* ⚜

Father-in-Law and His Invitation

The season had definitively shifted to autumn, and a cool breeze blew through the capital. Like brush strokes against a canvas, thin white clouds dotted the bright blue sky, stretching out toward the horizon. Dragonflies lazed through the air.

Making their way through the city below, which was still bustling despite the fall chill, were a pair of women. One was a beauty wearing a one-piece dress and a light jacket. The other was a young lady wrapped in an eggshell kimono that featured an autumnal tree nut pattern.

The woman in the kimono walked down the neatly paved street. Her name was Miyo Saimori, and she was engaged to the young head of one of the Empire's most prominent families, Kiyoka Kudou.

"I'm glad you got your shopping done without incident," chirped her future elder sister-in-law, Hazuki Kudou, from her side. Miyo smiled then replied:

"I am, too. Thank you for coming along with me, Sis."

"You're very welcome. Though part of me feels like I was having all the fun."

"Not at all. I also had a good time."

Several months had already come and gone since Miyo was introduced to Hazuki. Though she'd had various ups and downs along the way, Miyo still met with her two to three times a week to practice high-society etiquette.

But studying all the time was suffocating.

With that in mind, Hazuki had brought her sister-in-law on something she called a “date” to let off some steam.

When Miyo mentioned to the older woman that she was under the impression the term referred to an outing between a man and a woman, Hazuki replied, “Don’t worry about it! In that case, I’ll serve as your gentleman escort.” A confusing sentiment to Miyo, even now.

That being said, she loved going out on the town with Hazuki, so she didn’t have any complaints.

“*Hee-hee-hee*, I’ve got it. Watch carefully now, Brother Dearest. I’m about to do something you’ll be weeping with gratitude over later.”

A smile like that of a corrupt rural bureaucrat spread across Hazuki’s beautiful countenance.

She was referring to what they were heading into a department store together to buy—Western-style clothes for Miyo to wear.

Miyo had always been a bit curious about Western dress, but the opportunity to purchase them for herself, and the courage to do so, hadn’t presented itself. That was when Hazuki chimed in—

“I’m dying to see you dressed up in Western clothes, Miyo. You’ll be adorable, I know it!”

—and gave her the push she needed to take the plunge.

She couldn’t deny there was a tiny part of her that wanted to surprise her fiancé, too.

“…I’m still a bit nervous about how Kiyoka will respond, though…”

“You’ll be fine. After all, you were so, so, *so* cute when you tried them on! Even that surly lout will melt into an ogling puddle when he sees you. I’m sure of it!”

In truth, Miyo found the prospect of her elegant fiancé staring at her like that to be somewhat disconcerting… Still, she'd be happy if Hazuki's intuition was correct.

"I just hope you're right about that…"

"It'll be totally fine; have some confidence. And once you've gotten familiar with Western clothes, we'll try getting you a proper gown."

As the two continued chatting, they arrived at the city limits, where they had parked their automobile.

Having completed their mission to buy Western clothes, they planned to head home early and continue Miyo's etiquette lessons until it was time for dinner.

At this point, the timid girl who was unaccustomed to venturing into town last spring was long gone. Now Miyo genuinely enjoyed going out.

This area's close to Kiyoka's office…

She had taken the road there enough times to perfectly memorize the way and could easily head there without trouble. Of course, whether Kiyoka, Hazuki, or Yurie would permit her to do so was another matter entirely.

As Miyo was reflecting on all of this, it happened—a kimono-clad man ahead of them stumbled from the heavy load he was carrying.

"Ah!"

"Oh no, is he all right? Hang on. I feel like I've seen this man from behind before," Hazuki remarked.

The two women exchanged glances.

Meanwhile, the man got into a squat by the roadside and hunched over.

He wasn't looking so good. Deciding they couldn't leave the man there, the pair hurried over to him.

"Are you okay?"

Miyo placed a hand on his back, but when she peered over to get a look at his face, she gasped.

The man was deathly pale. His complexion aside, however, she could not help being entranced by his shockingly handsome and refined features.

The stranger was fair skinned, dainty, and slightly androgynous to boot. Though undoubtedly a man at first glance, he exuded the graceful elegance of a highborn princess, secluded from the world.

He looks a lot like Kiyoka.

Both that momentary observation and her panic dissipated the next instant.

The man looked toward Miyo, an anguished, cold sweat running down his brow.

"Thank you, kind young lady… But this is how it always is…"

"Huh? Um, are you…sure?"

Despite his assurances, she couldn't simply leave him behind in this state.

As Miyo furrowed her brow and deliberated over what to do, she heard Hazuki, who'd gone to fetch their automobile, cry out in shock.

"That voice. It couldn't be—Father?"

"Hmm? First this strange young lady comes up to me, and now I'm seeing hallucinations of my little girl… *Koff, koff.* It must finally be my time…"

The man coughed as he mumbled incoherently before gazing off into the distance.

Miyo could only stand there dumbfounded, completely unable to grasp the scene before her. Meanwhile, Hazuki stopped panicking and heaved a sigh.

“Oh, please, what sort of nonsense are you spewing? I was sure my mind was playing tricks on me, but it really is you. What are you doing here anyway? …All right, then. Kiyoka’s office isn’t too far from here, so we’ll bring you there to rest a bit.”

“Um, Sis? Are you sure about this?”

Shouldn’t they be getting him to a hospital? And wouldn’t they be inconveniencing Kiyoka by barging into his workplace during the middle of the day?

Hazuki dismissed Miyo’s anxieties with a wave of her hand.

“Taking him to the hospital won’t do anything, and it’s not like he isn’t Kiyoka’s father, too.”

Heeding the suggestion of her exasperated sister-in-law, Miyo propped the man’s back up and headed off with Hazuki. Before she knew it, they had arrived at her fiancé’s place of work—the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit station.

“And? What possessed you to come here? I’m really busy, you know,” Kiyoka groaned, rubbing his temples.

Miyo and Kiyoka were sitting next to each other on a sofa in the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit reception room. Across from them on another sofa sat Hazuki and her father.

“What’s the big deal? We were in the area,” Hazuki replied nonchalantly, not a hint of guilt on her face.

“Of course it’s a big deal. It’s a nuisance to get called away from work like this.”

“Um, Kiyoka…I’m sorry.”

When Miyo apologized to her fiancé, the annoyance on his face gave way to a smile as he reassured her.

“Don’t worry about it. If anyone’s at fault, it’s those two.”

He directed a piercing glare to the man and the woman on the sofa across from him.

Hazuki still seemed completely unbothered. Meanwhile, the man’s eyes instantly lit up at being addressed.

“Kiyoka! I missed you, it’s been so long! How are you doing? You never come by and visit any mo—*koff, koff !* ”

The sickly man energetically approached Kiyoka before breaking out into a violent fit of coughing.

“*Sigh.* I’m begging you, just stay put. You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Kiyoka heaved an extra-large sigh and turned to face Miyo.

“You’ve basically got the gist of it. This sickly middle-aged man is my father, Tadakiyo Kudou. He used to be the head of the family.”

Miyo had guessed as much after hearing Hazuki address him as “Father” earlier.

No wonder the two men looked so much alike.

The first time she saw his—Tadakiyo’s—face, Miyo had immediately grasped his resemblance to Kiyoka.

While the former patriarch was of fair complexion, he had more color in his face than his son. His stunningly handsome looks, however, were a mirror image of Kiyoka’s own.

In fact, he didn’t look middle-aged at all. The man must have been in his fifties, but he looked in his thirties at most. If anything, you could be forgiven for thinking he was Kiyoka’s brother at first glance.

Still thrown off by all these surprises, Miyo nodded at Kiyoka's words and bowed to Tadakiyo.

"Um, it's a pleasure to meet you. My name is Miyo Saimori."

"Nice to meet you. I'm Hazuki and Kiyoka's father, Tadakiyo Kudou. I hope we'll get along."

"Y-yes, I hope we can get along as well."

Miyo hesitantly gripped the pale and thin hand he thrust out in front of her.

…He really is just skin and bones.

Tadakiyo and Kiyoka had remarkably similar features, but upon a closer inspection, it was clear that the two were nothing alike in either expression or physique.

Though his slender body suggested otherwise, Kiyoka was a military man. Years of training had given him a deceptively sturdy build, and the skin on the palm of his sword hand was calloused and rough.

By contrast, Tadakiyo was every bit as fragile and delicate as his slender features suggested. He was also slightly shorter than Kiyoka, and the skin on his hands was so soft, it was almost transparent.

"Sorry to bother you like this, Miyo… As you can see, my father has a weak constitution," said Kiyoka.

"We can bring him to the hospital, but there's nothing they can do for him," added Hazuki.

Kiyoka wearily slumped back. Hazuki also shook her head in exasperation.

Completely at odds with his two children, Tadakiyo flashed a bright smile at Miyo.

"*Koff.* You really saved me, Miyo. I'm glad I got to meet you back there. *Koff, koff*—nothing would make me happier than to have such a kind and gentle-hearted daughter as you! *Koff !* "

"Keep quiet."

"Please, Father, hush."

Tadakiyo drooped his shoulder at the sharp retorts from both of his children.

"Well then," Kiyoka began, attempting to change the subject after he realized the conversation wasn't going anywhere. "What brought you out here? You must have a reason, right?"

"Yes! Of course."

Tadakiyo again leaned forward excitedly until Hazuki grabbed his arm and pulled him back.

Miyo tried to make sense of everything she knew about the Kudous for the time being.

Kiyoka's parents spent most of their time in a villa in the countryside. It had been that way ever since Tadakiyo had relinquished his position as the head of the family, and the two rarely came out to the capital.

This was just speculation, but based on today's events, Miyo assumed this state of affairs was the product of Tadakiyo's weak constitution.

That explained why Hazuki was living by herself in the large Kudou main estate in the central part of the imperial capital, and why Kiyoka had taken up residence in a small house on the outskirts of the city.

The whole family had been scattered to the wind.

“I came to see you two,” Tadakiyo declared meekly after regaining his composure. Kiyoka gave him a dubious look.

“Why now of all times? It seems a little late for that.”

“…Well, yes. I’ll admit I was overdue for a visit. But, you know, it doesn’t take much for the summer heat to get to me.”

“Sure…”

“That said, I didn’t really think it proper not to come see how things were going at all, considering I arranged the marriage proposal in the first place. And obviously I wanted to see my son and daughter’s smiling faces, too.”

“Then why didn’t you notify us before your arrival, Father?”

Hazuki made a sound point. His health being in such poor shape should have been all the more reason for him to have gotten in touch ahead of time.

At this, Tadakiyo grinned foolishly and replied—

“Oh, well, I just thought I would surprise you two…”

His words prompted both Kiyoka and Hazuki to angrily shout back in unison, “You’re just being a nuisance!”

Ultimately, they didn’t want to interfere with Kiyoka’s work any more than they already had, so Miyo, Hazuki, and Tadakiyo decided to head elsewhere.

Their destination of choice was the Kudou estate, a magnificent manor befitting a prominent noble family.

This place is too *big…*

The excessive size of the building overwhelmed Miyo. It was so splendid that she shuddered when she imagined what it would be like if she ended up living there; she was so out of place.

“All right, feel free to come on in, Miyo.”

At Hazuki’s—the current owner of the building’s—insistence, Miyo entered the main estate for the first time.

The structure’s Western-style stonework exterior had been painted a light yellow. Vines snaked across the walls in patterns here and there.

Passing through the large double doors at the entrance, they came upon a spacious entryway covered in a reserved dark green carpet. The ceiling was so high that Miyo wouldn’t be able to reach it even if she were twice as tall.

Looking around, she noticed beautiful stained glass embedded in the wall above the front door.

Miyo had felt similarly daunted when she’d visited her mother’s childhood home, the Usuba estate; something about Western-style houses was intimidating to her. She’d grown up in a traditional Japanese-style residence, and her current home was also of this make, so she figured this was simply because she was more accustomed to them.

Moreover, only the second floor of the Usuba household had been remodeled in the Western style. This dwelling, on the other hand, was a true mansion, which made her even more anxious.

“I’m so sorry about this, Miyo. It turned into a mess at the drop of a hat.”

Hazuki seemed guilty, so Miyo shook her head in a flurry.

“N-not at all. Um, there’ve been a lot of surprises, but I’ve been managing… Besides, I’ve been wanting to introduce myself to Kiyoka’s parents for a while now.”

“I see.”

Her fiancé had previously told Miyo something to the effect of, “There’s no need to go out of your way to introduce yourself to my parents.”

He’d insisted that, as the head of the family, he wasn’t going to consult with his parents over every small detail of the marriage.

Nevertheless, while Kiyoka may not have let the former heads of the family voice any complaints, deep down, they were unlikely to view his potential partner in marriage very highly without meeting her beforehand. She had gathered that Kiyoka wasn’t very interested in keeping up with his parents, but it still saddened Miyo to think they might not look kindly upon her.

She wanted to formally introduce herself and establish a relationship with his parents if she had the opportunity.

I just know everyone would be happier that way.

Tadakiyo coming to meet her of his own accord and treating her so kindly had been an unexpected and happy surprise. To Miyo, at the very least.

“Being here really brings me back.”

Tadakiyo said cheerfully, looking around the entryway.

“But you almost never come to visit.”

“Indeed… Miyo. Allow me to apologize again for not coming to see you sooner. The truth is, I shouldn’t have delayed checking in on you both for so long.”

“Please, don’t let it bother you.”

After Miyo replied, she had a sudden realization:

Tadakiyo himself had instigated the marriage proposal between her and Kiyoka. In which case, there was something Miyo had to confirm for herself.

The three of them headed to the lounge.

This, too, was an extravagantly grand chamber. Exotic geometric designs adorned the walls and ceiling, along with gorgeous, flower-shaped light fixtures. The sofa was covered in leather, and even its wooden legs were elaborately engraved.

Awed by the dazzling interior, Miyo gently situated herself on the undoubtedly expensive sofa.

As the servants set down some fragrant black tea and tea cakes, Miyo seized the opportunity to speak.

"…Excuse me," she began timidly.

"What is it?" Tadakiyo asked, tilting his head with a smile.

"Are you sure you're satisfied with me?"

"Miyo?" Hazuki interjected, frowning at her question and setting down her teacup.

"Now, what would you mean by that?" Tadakiyo inquired.

"In…in my original home, I was basically treated like I wasn't even there. So I'm wondering how people would have even known I was a member of the Saimori family…"

The atmosphere in the room instantly chilled. But she couldn't back down now. Miyo summoned what little courage she had and continued.

"When people talked about the 'Saimori daughter,' they were referring to my little sister. I essentially ended up coming to the Kudou family by accident."

In fact, her little sister had insisted that she was more suited to be Kiyoka's wife. Miyo, however, had told her that she didn't want to give up her place at his side.

Yet Miyo hadn't been able to assert that she would be a better bride. The truth was that only Kaya had possessed the skills and education suitable to be wedded into the Kudou family at the time.

Miyo simply couldn't believe that Tadakiyo had sought someone as insignificant and penniless as herself at the time.

"In other words, you're wondering if you weren't the woman who I requested to be Kiyoka's wife. Is that it?"

"That's…right."

Hearing Tadakiyo verbalize it himself made her chest ache. Despite knowing it was simply the truth.

Kiyoka had told Miyo that he wanted her by his side. She had also decided to trust in him and stay with him through thick and thin. Yet she was still afraid of being told she wasn't needed.

She unconsciously lowered her head.

But what Tadakiyo said next was neither harsh nor cold.

"Kiyoka's going to be upset with me if I do this, isn't he? Ah well, I'm sure it'll work out," Tadakiyo said before gently rubbing Miyo's head.

"I'll admit, I thought that the rumors I heard about the Saimori daughter were about your sister."

"…I see."

"But I actually knew about you, too."

Miyo instinctively lifted up her head.

Greeting her was Tadakiyo's stiff, troubled smile.

"That being said, I only dug into things after I heard the stories about Kaya. I guess I thought that since the Saimoris had another daughter, she might be the one to come to our family."

Shinichi Saimori's penchant for doting on the daughter of his second wife was well known, but Miyo's existence wasn't exactly a secret, either.

According to Tadakiyo, that was why he'd purposely avoided asking for one of them in particular and went through an acquaintance to ask Shinichi, "What do you say to having your daughter marry my boy?"

He'd been gambling to see which one of his two daughters would arrive at Kiyoka's doorstep.

"See, my son was so against getting married back then that I just figured I'd take a chance… I was practically desperate at that point."

"…Desperate…"

"Oh, obviously, I get that I was rude to the Saimori family. I do feel guilty."

Miyo grew flustered. She had no idea how she was supposed to react to this information.

"I also insulted you, Miyo. For that I am truly sorry."

"N-no, it's okay."

"Clearly, I didn't go about things in the best way, but I would do it again in a heartbeat. If anything, I feel like giving myself a pat on the back for a job well done."

Tadakiyo chuckled and crossed his arms with a proud look on his face.

"After all, Kiyoka…my son's changed ever since you came into his life, Miyo."

"What?"

She blinked.

Kiyoka's…changed?

She didn't know what Tadakiyo meant by that. Kiyoka had been kind to her from the very beginning, and it didn't take her long to realize the tales of his heartlessness were unfounded.

Of course, she could also imagine how his exceedingly handsome features coupled with his poor way with words would give people the wrong impression. Still, Tadakiyo must have understood what Kiyoka was like on the inside—he was his father.

Tadakiyo didn't provide any answers at Miyo's questioning tilt of her head.

"That's why you have nothing to worry about. I'm so grateful that you came to his side."

"…Thank you very much."

She choked up.

Miyo had been convinced she was completely and utterly worthless when she was living with the Saimoris. Though she wouldn't go quite so far as to say that now, she did think of her old self as being empty, nearly a lost cause.

Despite her low opinion of herself, people had repeatedly insisted Miyo was irreplaceable since she'd arrived at Kiyoka's side.

Not in her wildest dreams could she have imagined things going this perfectly. If anything, it made her wonder if she had the right to be this happy.

"Fuyu's still a bit cross over it all at the moment, but I'm sure she'll come around to you eventually, Miyo."

"…Fuyu?"

"Mother will? Oh, no, there's no way."

This “Fuyu” woman Tadakiyo had referred to was his wife—Hazuki and Kiyoka’s mother.

Miyo was shocked by the downright loathing look that came over Hazuki’s face when Fuyu was mentioned. She’d never seen her sister-in-law look so disgusted before.

“Honestly. I just don’t understand why you and Kiyoka hate your mother so much.”

“It’s less that we hate her and more that there aren’t many people in this world capable of *liking* someone who’s irritable all day every day.”

“Was that a roundabout way of calling your old man a weirdo…? In any event, that subject’s related to why I’ve come out here, so let’s save it for when Kiyoka arrives.”

From there, the conversation between the three of them bounced from topic to topic, and before they knew it, the sun was already dipping down to the horizon.

Though the idle chitchat was enjoyable, the fact that they were just sitting around without doing anything made Miyo uncomfortable.

Just when the lack of activity threatened to become more than she could bear, Kiyoka finally arrived at the Kudou main estate.

“The master scion has returned.”

Miyo couldn’t help lifting her head up instantly at the servant’s announcement.

By “master scion,” they meant Kiyoka. Technically, her fiancé should have been referred to as “master,” as he was the current head of the family. Since Tadakiyo, the previous family patriarch, had relinquished that position so early, however, the servants still addressed him by his old title, while Kiyoka was “master scion.”

Relief washed over Miyo as she rushed out of the room in excitement.

“Welcome back, Kiyoka.”

She found him in the entryway, panting slightly, as if he’d rushed to get to the estate. Noticing her, he relaxed his lips and replied, “Thanks.”

When Miyo went to take off his jacket like usual, he turned around abruptly and stared at her hard in the face.

“Miyo, did my father do anything to you?”

“Wh-what? Um, like what…?”

“Hug you, hold your hand, pat you on the head, make advances to you.”

Kiyoka listed everything in a single breath. Miyo flinched for a second. One of his examples definitely rang a bell.

Nor did Kiyoka overlook the momentary and subtle change in his fiancée’s expression.

“…He did, didn’t he?”

“N-no, um, well—”

“Oh yes, I get the picture. Time to turn that hopeless father of mine to ashes.”

Kiyoka’s expression grew stony as he lit and extinguished a blue flame in his open palm.

Panicked, Miyo pulled on her seething fiancé’s arm.

“Y-you can’t!”

“Oh, no, I don’t mind. Disposing of that pest will be refreshing.”

“W-well, I mind. It would tear me apart to see you become a murderer, Kiyoka.”

This was a rare chance for a father-to-son chat. They didn't need to like each other, but she at least wanted them to talk to each other to resolve their conflict.

"…"

"…"

It seemed that her feelings of desperation had affected him. Giving in to his fiancée, Kiyoka quelled the flames of his anger.

"Fine. I'll hear his excuse, at least."

"Thank you."

The two went to the dining room at the servant's direction. Dinner had already been served, and Hazuki and Tadakiyo were seated at the table.

Both father and daughter grinned from ear to ear as they looked toward the couple.

"My, you two certainly took your time, didn't you? I don't remember the walk from the entryway being *that* long."

"Yup, this played out exactly like I imagined. They were busy telling each other, 'I'm home, *ma chérie*,' and 'Welcome home, *mon amour*!'"

Ma chérie? Mon amour…? Miyo didn't recognize the words, so she assumed they were from another language.

As she stood there in confusion, she felt frigid air radiate next to her, as though they were in the middle of a tundra.

"Take back that sickening delusion of yours this instant. Before I burn you to a crisp."

"What do you mean, 'sickening'? Why, that's how Fuyu and I voice our love for each other!"

“Huh? Seriously? You say that to Mother?”

Tadakiyo puffed out his cheeks in childish indignation as Hazuki stared at him in utter disbelief.

Seeing that things were gradually getting out of hand, Miyo got Kiyoka’s attention and encouraged him to sit down.

“Okay, let’s eat, everyone.”

At the encouragement of Hazuki, who was the head of the house, they each picked up their respective chopsticks and cutlery.

In light of Tadakiyo’s weak constitution, the chef had thoughtfully prepared a serving of easy-to-swallow tofu and rice porridge for the former patriarch. Hazuki, on the other hand, had been given a colorful and extravagant soup and salad combo mainly composed of vegetables. And in front of Kiyoka’s place sat a typical Japanese-style meal featuring fish, simmered bonito-broth-based dishes, and the like.

Miyo’s meal was largely identical to her fiancé’s. The main dish was an autumn salmon the chef had flavored with a rare combination of Japanese seasonings and Western herbs. It was accompanied by a miso soup and sweet potato soup. There was also a vegetable side dish and a generous serving of shiitake, shimeji, and maitake mushrooms. The well-marinated fungi were rich in flavor without being overly salty.

I’ve never tasted anything like this…but it’s truly delicious.

She would have expected nothing less from the Kudou family chef. First class in both skill and consideration for their employers’ respective tastes, they had utilized the ingredients in a novel way that wouldn’t have occurred to an amateur like her.

Miyo busily worked her chopsticks, all the while mulling over which parts of the meal she could use in her own cooking.

A few moments passed. Once everyone had gotten halfway through the meal, Kiyoka touched on the main topic of the evening.

“About that matter we didn’t get to this afternoon.”

“Oh yes, that’s right. It’s been so long since I’ve had food from the main estate that I lost myself for a moment.”

Tadakiyo chuckled. Miyo could keenly perceive Kiyoka’s irritation.

“But in all seriousness, I wasn’t lying earlier. I came here to see you two, visit the capital and the estate, and check in on how everything was going. But I did make this journey for another reason—Kiyoka, Miyo.” Her future father-in-law turned to both of them as he called their names before continuing. “I want to invite the both of you to the villa where Fuyu and I live.”

“Huh?!”

Miyo was the only one surprised. Both Kiyoka and Hazuki were unfazed; they seemed to have already surmised as much.

Kiyoka’s single-word response was similarly unenthused:

“No.”

This was no surprise to Miyo.

She’d seen this coming based on how Kiyoka had acted since getting here.

In all honesty, she wanted to go to the villa. But she didn’t want to force Kiyoka to go along with her wishes if it was only going to displease him.

“Or at least that’s what I’d like to say.”

Just as Miyo started to get discouraged, Kiyoka resumed speaking, much as he seemed to loathe it.

“Unfortunately, I’m not in a position to refuse… I reluctantly accept the invitation.”

“Oh, really? Are you sure?” Miyo asked.

“Some unavoidable circumstances came up at work. The villa visit is just incidental.”

“It’s for work? Are you sure I should go with you?”

She might get in his way if he was visiting for his military duties.

Kiyoka smiled slightly at her question.

“It’s okay. The work itself doesn’t pose much of a threat if you’re not directly involved, and the defenses around the villa are flawless. It’s no problem at all for you to come along.”

“…Then I’d be happy to join.”

Just like that, Miyo was set to be guided by Tadakiyo to the Kudou family villa, together with Kiyoka.

◇◇◇

Dinner was over. As Kiyoka prepared to depart, his father called out to stop him.

“Kiyoka.”

“What?”

He hadn’t meant to reply to Tadakiyo so bluntly.

Kiyoka was fully cognizant of his ambivalence toward his father.

It wasn’t that Tadakiyo had done anything to him directly. Rather, his distrust of the man stemmed from how he’d allowed his mother to do whatever she pleased back when the whole family lived together at the estate. Nothing more.

It seemed that Kiyoka's unwillingness to settle on a marriage partner had weighed on Tadakiyo for a long time. Yet for all his anxieties, the man had never realized that his wife was one of the driving forces behind Kiyoka's hesitancy.

Frankly, he thought his father had deserved the stress on occasion.

…I wanted to send him packing this time, too.

Kiyoka glanced down at Miyo, who was blinking beside him.

"Truth is, there've been suspicious people popping up around the villa lately."

"Suspicious people? The villa's got a barrier around it, right?"

"Yeah, it does. That's why I don't really think they'd cause us any harm. But it makes you wonder, doesn't it? Why, it might even have something to do with your work. Just thought I'd let you know."

"…It's possible."

Kiyoka thought back over the mission the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit had been contracted to handle.

The details of the assignment involved an unnatural phenomenon said to be occurring in the area around a farming village. Though the scale of the phenomenon was small, the future emperor, Takaihito, had nevertheless asked Kiyoka to take care of it.

The farming village in question was close to the villa his parents called home.

This couldn't be a coincidence. Takaihito must have had an ulterior motive behind nominating Kiyoka to handle the task.

"I confess that I'd like you to do something about it, if possible."

"I'll consider it if I have the time to spare."

A frustrated sigh escaped his lips.

The only reason he hadn't dismissed his father outright and told him to figure it out himself, like he'd always done up until that point, was because his fiancée was standing beside him.

Don't run away from your father, her eyes seemed to say.

"Time to go home," said Kiyoka, turning to Miyo.

"Yes."

Estranged or not, he was lucky to have an opportunity to confront his parents and try to get through to them with his words—meeting Miyo had taught him that.

He owed it to her to try just one more time to face the mother he detested so much.

⚜ *CHAPTER 2* ⚜

Quivering, Embarrassed

It took half a day by train to reach the villa from the capital.

This was Miyo's first experience using this "railroad" invention, so she was tense the entire trip.

Not only was she incredulous that such a huge vehicle could actually move at all, but the interior of the wooden first-class carriage they were in was so fancy, she found it hard to relax.

In the several hours that had passed since first boarding the train to depart that morning, Miyo hadn't moved an inch. She was sitting straight as a rod, her hands folded in her lap and a tense look on her face.

"Miyo, you can relax a bit more."

"Easier said than done…"

Engrossed in a newspaper, Kiyoka was dressed in a casual white shirt and black slacks instead of his usual military garb. He seemed totally at home.

She definitely wouldn't be picking up on those mannerisms of his anytime soon.

"Miyo, would you like some tea? It's pretty good stuff," Tadakiyo said, leisurely sipping a cup of tea. However, the carriage was shaking too much for Miyo to be sure that she wouldn't spill anything.

"No…I'm fine, thank you."

"You sure? We've still got a ways to go, though. If you want anything, don't hesitate to ask."

“Th-thank you.”

Miyo appreciated his concern, but she didn’t see herself making a request anytime soon, either.

“Still, it’s too bad Hazuki couldn’t come along with us,” mumbled Tadakiyo. Miyo nodded and replied, “It truly is.”

Hazuki had helped Miyo prepare for the journey, but she couldn’t join them this time. She apparently had an important party coming up that she couldn’t afford to miss.

“I really, really wanted to come with you! Now who’s going to protect Miyo from Mother?! ” she had shouted, but there wasn’t anything they could do to change things.

“We’ll get some peace and quiet without her.”

“…But she wanted to tag along so badly, Kiyoka.”

Miyo’s unguarded outpouring on the subject left Kiyoka at a loss for words. He scrunched his brow.

“…Then how about we bring her back something?”

“That’s perfect!”

He really was kind at heart. Miyo broke into a smile.

They continued conversing like this. Along the way, Miyo almost fainted from her nerves as she rocked back and forth in the train car until noon. Fortunately, they managed to fit in a light meal during this time.

At last, the train stopped at a town that had found recent fame as a hot springs destination. That didn’t change the fact that they were in the countryside, though. The surrounding area consisted mostly of farming villages and mountain hamlets. It was like night and day compared to the prosperity of the capital.

Hot springs weren't the only thing this town had going for it, though. Thanks to the abundance of natural shade here, the area was blessed with cooler summers than the capital. For that reason, the Kudous weren't the only wealthy family who had a vacation home here.

"Let's get off, shall we."

Tadakiyo grabbed his bag and stood up.

Miyo continued after him and went to grab her luggage. Just then, a porcelain hand stretched out beside her to lift her bag.

"K-Kiyoka."

Her fiancé walked off without a word, his bag in one hand and Miyo's in the other.

"Kiyoka, I can carry my own things…!"

"I don't mind."

"Still, though."

She followed behind him as he walked briskly to descend from the train to the platform.

When they did, a lone elderly man came up to meet them. He was dressed in a swallow-tailed coat, and his hair was perfectly coiffed. Miyo could tell he was a house servant from a single glance.

"Welcome back, Master."

The man bowed deeply before Tadakiyo then turned to Kiyoka and Miyo.

"Welcome, Master Scion, Young Mistress."

"Nice to see you, Sasaki."

"It has been a while, indeed. You've grown into an even finer young man."

The man called Sasaki was, per Kiyoka's introduction, the caretaker and butler for the Kudous' villa.

Although his overall appearance itself was neat and tidy, his bright and gentle smile lent him the air of a genial old man.

More important…

"Y-Y-Young Mistress…?"

Her cheeks grew hot as it slowly sank in.

Wasn't it a bit hasty of him to call her that when they still hadn't married yet? She wasn't exactly embarrassed, but the title did make her feel a bit bashful.

"Hee-hee. Young—excuse me—Master Scion. You've found yourself a truly beautiful wife."

"I agree. Wait, did you almost call me 'Young Master' just now?"

"Of course not. You must have misheard me."

Kiyoka shrugged in exasperation at Sasaki playing dumb.

They all got into the automobile outside the station, and with Sasaki at the wheel, they headed toward the villa.

The area around the station had lodgings and souvenir shops aimed at tourists. Though this downtown area was decently busy, as they got farther and farther away, the scenery gave way to nothing but mountains, trees, and rice fields.

The villa lay at the end of about a ten-minute drive. It had been constructed in a small forest on the outskirts of a rural rice-farming village.

Although the lone road through the forest was well maintained, their surroundings were mountainous and untended. They were in much closer proximity to nature here than in the house that Miyo and Kiyoka shared.

Miyo had been hoping to see some wild animals, but unfortunately, they arrived before her wish could come true.

"*Phew*, here at last."

"You must be tired from such a long trip."

Tadakiyo got out of the automobile and stretched his body, coughing here and there as he did.

It was nippy outside. The brisk wind of the capital was chilly enough, but thanks to the nearby mountains and higher elevation here, the air was even colder.

The trees surrounding the villa had already lost most of their leaves. Winter was right around the corner.

"The air out here is very clear, isn't it?"

"That's what happens when there's so much nature around. More importantly, are you cold, Miyo?"

Miyo shook her head at her worrying fiancé.

"I have this *haori* overcoat, so I'm fine."

Kiyoka had picked out the fabric for her *haori*, and she was particularly fond of it.

Miyo's outfit for the day consisted of her chrysanthemum-patterned kimono and the matching indigo *haori* that Suzushima's had tailored recently.

She'd felt guilty about having new kimonos and accessories made with each changing season, but Hazuki told her, "Don't worry about it, and let me pay for it." Now she obediently accepted her offers.

"Really? Good thing we had that tailored, then."

"Yes, thank you."

As they conversed, Sasaki led them into the entryway of the villa.

It was a two-story structure, about half as large as the main estate. Compared to Kiyoka's one-floor house and its handful of rooms, however, this Western-style wooden residence was several times larger.

The exterior walls were painted a subtle cream color, and the roof was a bright brown. Overall, the building came across as more charming than pretty.

Sasaki pulled back the heavy-looking main door, and the three of them—Miyo, Kiyoka, and Tadakiyo—stepped into the villa.

"Welcome home."

The servants of the house, who were gathered in the entry hall, bowed their heads in unison. They included an elderly woman about as old as Sasaki, a middle-aged man and two middle-aged women, and a younger man in his twenties. Lastly, there was a thirty-year-old man in a chef outfit, which made six in total.

A woman in an elegant dress strode boldly out before them.

"Welcome home."

Then she scowled, snapping open her fan and gracefully hiding her mouth as she addressed them.

Miyo tensed up slightly behind Kiyoka. This had to be *her*.

"*Koff*, I'm home! Nothing happened while I was gone, did it, *ma chérie*?"

In contrast to the clearly foul-tempered woman, Fuyu Kudou, Tadakiyo burst into a smile and rushed over to her.

"How many more times will I have to tell you before you understand? I'm *not* playing along with that tiresome back-and-forth of yours," Fuyu spat. "Such nonsense."

Despite his wife's frigid attitude, Tadakiyo didn't stop smiling for an instant. If anything, her grousing seemed to please him.

Even from the sidelines, it was obvious the couple had a tremendous gap in enthusiasm for each other.

"Come now, don't be like that. I'm just telling you, my beloved *chérie*—"

"There's absolutely no love between the two of us."

Splat.

Miyo could almost hear Fuyu slap Tadakiyo's words out of the air with her brilliantly blunt rebuttal.

After coldly silencing her husband, Fuyu turned her almond-shaped eyes to the couple behind him—Kiyoka and Miyo.

With subtle, flowing movements, Kiyoka moved in front of Miyo to shield her.

"Kiyoka."

She addressed her son with the same frigidity she'd reserved for Tadakiyo.

Fuyu had a beautiful face, sharp as a knife. Since she didn't crack the slightest smile on top of it, she had an intimidating aura about her.

"You've neglected to visit for *quite* some time now, haven't you? How coldhearted you are."

"Coldhearted? I beg to disagree."

"So you don't think never once showing up to Obon or New Year's shows a lack of filial respect?"

"Not in the slightest."

A strained air passed between the two of them. The stiff and formal conversation, as if they weren't parent and child at all, was rapidly elevating the tension in the room.

But Miyo couldn't simply remain hidden behind Kiyoka and watch things play out.

Summoning up all the courage she had, she stepped beside her fiancé.

"Um, excuse me…!"

"Wait."

Kiyoka made a discreet remark in an attempt to stop Miyo, but instead of backing down, she nodded in response. Slightly surprised, he sucked in his breath.

Miyo squeezed her fiancé's slightly sweaty palm and looked straight ahead at Fuyu.

"I-it's a pleasure to meet you. I'm Miyo Saimori."

"…"

She couldn't tell if Fuyu was looking at her or not. The woman didn't react in the slightest.

"Um—"

"Kiyoka."

When she spoke up again, Fuyu cut her off, as though Miyo's words had never reached her ears.

Miyo heard a faint tongue click beside her. She turned to Kiyoka and saw his beautiful profile grimly cloud over.

"Kiyoka. Would you mind explaining that shabby attendant of yours?"

Attendant. Miyo immediately understood that the word was aimed at her.

For nearly ten years, she had been treated like a servant. At this point, it didn't depress her to be referred to that way, but it still stung to hear it again after so long.

And it seemed Kiyoka wasn't going to let that slide.

"…Attendant?"

"Yes, that's right. I'm referring to that shameless, ugly wench standing next to the *head* of the Kudou family."

"…"

"What village did she crawl out of, I wonder? She's positively shabby. People will question your character when they find out a man of your station is keeping such a vulgar woman at his side."

Concealing her mouth with her fan, Fuyu glanced over at Miyo as if she were looking at a pile of filth.

This was the final straw. Thunder and lightning roared outside the mansion.

"!"

Amid everyone's bewilderment from the intense, ear-shattering sound, Miyo could clearly hear Kiyoka make a low growl.

"…Say that one more time."

"Hold on, Kiyoka, that's going too far now."

Tadakiyo calmly reprimanded his son, but Kiyoka completely ignored him.

"I told you to say that one more time, Fuyu Kudou."

"What?! How dare you speak to your own mother like that…!"

“Mother? Don’t make me laugh. I’ve never once thought of you as my mother.”

Fuyu’s cheeks instantly flushed crimson.

Kiyoka glared back at her with a look of absolute zero, wholly unlike any of the cold stares he had sent Tadakiyo’s way before.

“Excuse me?!”

“Don’t act surprised. We know who’s really the vulgar one here.”

Kiyoka sneered at her. A smile clearly aimed at ridiculing his mother.

“I gave you ample notice that I would be bringing my fiancée with me today. You should know her name, too.”

Fuyu snapped her fan shut so hard, it looked ready to splinter.

Her face was bright red, and she was biting down on her lip; she was ready to explode at any moment.

Unable to intervene, everyone else present watched the mother-son conversation with bated breath.

“Kiyoka.”

Miyo was fine. She pulled on Kiyoka’s sleeve to try to make it clear to him.

But it was Fuyu, not her fiancé, who reacted to her gesture.

“You lowly abandoned brat! I won’t have you laying your hand casually on my son like that!”

Miyo tensed her shoulders with a jolt at the furious scream.

Abandoned—I suppose she’s right about that, Miyo thought calmly.

Her mother was long dead, and her father had never paid her any attention. And of course, her stepmother hadn’t treated her like a

daughter, either. She couldn't argue with someone telling her she was an orphan, so she didn't find Fuyu's comment upsetting.

The servants, however, looked worried that Kiyoka would really lose it over his mother's abrasive remark.

"I could never accept a girl with such a third-rate upbringing into the Kudou family."

"…" Miyo didn't respond.

"See? Silent and unable to say anything in her defense. Clear proof of her lack of education. Surely even you can see that, Kiyoka."

"Shut up."

His curt rebuttal came out just as Tadakiyo stepped between mother and son.

"Enough, both of you."

Fuyu frowned disapprovingly and flipped her gaze in the other direction.

"Let's go," Kiyoka said, pulling Miyo by the hand and walking off. Then he stopped right before the stairs leading up to the second floor and gazed at his mother condescendingly. His eyes were now void of any anger or hatred.

"The next time you say anything to Miyo, I'll kill you."

"K-kill—?!"

Everyone else widened their eyes in surprise.

No one in the room could laugh his statement off as an idle threat. Kiyoka's demeanor told the whole story—he was completely serious about ending her life.

"…Kiyoka."

Tadakiyo was the only one who painfully muttered a reply, while everyone else's mouths remained shut. Miyo quietly allowed her enraged fiancé to take her along as they left the others behind.

Sasaki hastily followed after the couple to show them to their room, a corner suite on the second floor.

It was quite spacious and received ample sunlight. In addition to a canopied bed that was large enough for three people to sleep comfortably, the room also contained a comfortable luxury chair and table. Though the wallpaper looked plain at first glance, upon closer inspection, an elaborate design popped into view.

Farther back in the room, there was a tiled balcony.

It's so big…

Miyo subtly glanced at her fiancé beside her to try to read his expression.

She wanted to say something, but the lack of emotion on his face scared her.

"Now then, please make yourselves both at home. If you need anything, just say the word, and I shall take care of it."

"Thanks for doing all that."

Finished with bringing their luggage inside the room, Sasaki bowed once and departed. As soon as the door had clicked shut, Kiyoka heaved a sigh.

"…I'm sorry, Miyo."

Miyo knew why he was apologizing. But as far as she was concerned, there was no need.

"Kiyoka," she started.

All she was trying to say was that it wasn't his fault. And yet…

The next instant, Kiyoka gently embraced Miyo in his arms, as if handling a fragile vase. It all happened so suddenly that she completely forgot what she wanted to say.

“I’m sorry. I put you through something awful.”

Kiyoka stroked the top of her head.

Enveloped in his scent, feeling his warmth… With each stroke to her head, the tension she was holding in her body melted further and further away.

He was warm. Reassuring.

Miyo had assumed she was so accustomed to insults that more wouldn’t bother her. Only now did she consider she might have been wrong.

“I should have known my mother would act like that.”

Her fiancé’s anguished murmur betrayed a strong sense of regret.

“Kiyoka…”

“Forgive me. It’s my fault.”

Kiyoka was more depressed about what had happened than Miyo herself. The wrinkles on his brow were denser, and his eyes were drooping more than usual.

“It’s all right. I’m okay, Kiyoka.”

“Still.”

Personally, Miyo thought the things Fuyu had said to her were reasonable. But if she told him something like, “What’s there to do? She’s right,” it would only sadden him further.

So she tried to be positive instead.

“I, um, I’ll try to do my best.”

“Miyo…”

“I can’t change the past, but I…I still really want to try getting along with your mother if I can.”

Blood relation, family ties—Miyo knew full well that these things did not guarantee someone would understand you unconditionally.

But now she also knew that it was impossible to build a trusting relationship with someone if you gave up on them immediately.

I’m not going to run away.

Though she didn’t have the slightest idea how she’d get Fuyu to understand her.

But unlike in the past, she wasn’t on her own. Even if she failed… Kiyoka would still be on her side. Hazuki, too. Miyo wasn’t ever going to be alone again, and because of that, she could persevere.

“So, Kiyoka? Will you watch over me for a little while?”

He grimaced as he stood, keeping his arms wrapped around her.

The expression he wore was less like his usual frown and more like a sulking pout. It had an adorable childishness to it that Miyo couldn’t help smiling at.

“…All right, then.”

“Thank you.”

“But bear in mind that I meant it when I said I’d kill her. If Fuyu says something like that to you again, tell me. I’ll turn her to ash on the spot.”

“Y-you can’t do that…,” she stammered, making sure to emphasize her objection.

She didn’t want to think that his remark about killing his own parent was a serious one, but the murderous glare he’d dropped earlier seemed genuine, if not a little frightening.

“Don’t stop me.”

“Huh? U-um, please don’t say that.”

Kiyoka finally released his hold on Miyo after a long sigh.

Separated from the warmth of his embrace, she felt almost lonel—

L-lonely…?

She couldn’t believe she was already missing being in Kiyoka’s arms after it had helped her calm down so much. Did that mean she actually wanted to stay there longer?

How absolutely immodest of her. That behavior could disqualify her from being a true noblewoman.

Miyo reflexively brought her hands to her burning cheeks in an attempt to conceal them. Her dizzying thoughts swirled frantically in her head.

“If you insist. Anyway, we have some time before dinner. I’m going to head out into the village for a bit.”

“You’re not going to rest a little?”

The sun had just reached its zenith in the sky. They said sunset came faster in the mountains, but even with that mind, there was still a fair bit of time until then.

“Nope. We were sitting for the whole trip out here, for one. I also don’t really want to be cooped up in the estate for too long. Now’s my chance to see what things are like out there.”

Kiyoka donned his coat, putting only his wallet in his pocket.

“Um, and what about me…?”

Putting on a brave face and talking big was all well and good, but Miyo suddenly felt uneasy about being left in the villa by herself. Now she was keenly aware of Hazuki’s absence.

“You can stay behind and rest if you’d like, but…”

Kiyoka trailed off for a moment in hesitation. Then—

“If you’re feeling up to it, would you like to accompany me?”

That was how Kiyoka invited Miyo on a work outing for the very first time.

The nearby farming village had a population of around one hundred people. It was about a fifteen-minute walk from the villa.

From what Miyo was told, there was also a hot spring and a small guest house in the area, along with a souvenir shop. Overall, it was thriving for a rural farming village.

The roads weren’t paved like in the capital, but they were evenly leveled and relatively easy to walk on.

A cold breeze blew by every so often, causing Miyo to shiver and tense up her shoulders.

“This is mainly an investigative mission.”

“You’re looking into something?”

Kiyoka was a powerful fighter, so Miyo assumed he’d been dispatched here to clash with an imposing Grotesquerie, but it seemed that wasn’t the case.

He nodded lightly in response to her question.

“Yeah… We’ve gotten reports of a peculiar, bizarre phenomenon occurring in this town.”

His turn of phrase was already plenty peculiar on its own.

The word *bizarre* already described something strange or inconceivable, so what exactly did it entail if it was also *peculiar* on top of that?

“By ‘peculiar,’ I mean,” Kiyoka began to explain, sensing Miyo’s confusion, “that this phenomenon is unforeseen.”

“Un…foreseen?”

“That’s right. For example, all the regions in this country have their own native oral traditions, right?”

The stories passed down through word of mouth in each region—folktales.

Uneducated as she was, Miyo didn’t have much knowledge on the subject, but she could at least think of several famous old tales and legends off the top of her head. Each of those stories must have been set in a particular region of Japan.

“This area also has its own folktales, though they’re mostly your garden-variety stories… Foxes and racoon dogs playing tricks on villagers, or people with a connection to the region becoming wandering spirits, et cetera.”

In other words, there was always the possibility that a bizarre phenomenon related to the surrounding region’s folktales could occur. But if that happened, the people of the region would usually have enough knowledge from their oral traditions to deal with the phenomenon on their own.

Those sorts of strange happenings generally weren’t enough to prompt an investigation from Kiyoka’s unit.

The phenomenon they were investigating this time, however, wasn’t a feature of any of the region’s folktales.

“According to our sources, accounts of people spotting the figure of a large-framed horned fiend in this area have been coming in one after another. If we cannot verify any folktales in line with this phenomenon, that means there have been no records of such an incident until now.”

"…So basically you're saying that something that shouldn't be happening *is* happening?"

"That's not exactly it. New ghost and monster stories pop up day in and day out, everywhere you look. These tales can give rise to new Grotesqueries on occasion."

Investigating the unknown origin of these "peculiar" bizarre phenomena was one of the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit's responsibilities.

People fear mysterious things they don't understand. If an unnatural phenomenon unfamiliar to this region occurred, people would grow terrified, and their fearful imaginations would bestow even great power to the Grotesquerie.

"We need to nip this in the bud if a Grotesquerie is behind this. And if something else is to blame, we need to resolve this harmless rumor before it gains enough power to produce a Grotesquerie itself. That's our job."

"I-is that so…?"

Miyo was somewhere between cluelessness and understanding.

She was slightly ignorant of the world and lacking in education, so the explanation felt somewhat beyond her.

"Anyway."

Kiyoka gently rested a hand atop her head.

"First, I need to assess the situation and gather information. Come along with me for a bit."

"Okay."

She couldn't stop herself from grinning.

It made her happy to be out with Kiyoka. On top of this, the fact he'd opened up a bit to her about his job was proof he trusted and acknowledged her. That made her even happier.

Still, it vexed her that she couldn't help him fully because she was lacking in so many ways.

By the time they got through the forest surrounding the villa and began walking on the gently sloping downhill road, they were already on the threshold of the village.

A small, weed-covered stone representation of a deity stood near what appeared to be the entrance.

"That's a *jizo* statue, isn't it?"

"Yeah."

In a single fluid motion, Kiyoka knelt down and brought his hands together in front of the statue. Miyo copied him.

"…Is there some folktale about that *jizo* statue, too?"

Miyo asked after they had left it behind, to which Kiyoka shook his head.

"Maybe, but it's not related to the current incident."

"Oh, really?"

Kiyoka gave a short affirming reply as Miyo followed behind him.

"That was more of a greeting. Since we're outsiders here."

With the rice harvest long over, and the agricultural off-season drawing near, the village appeared somewhat lonesome. They saw other people here and there, but there weren't any signs of other visitors.

Miyo sensed people staring at her and Kiyoka; they were wildly out of place with their surroundings.

“Let’s try speaking with the people over there.”

Kiyoka pointed at a shop selling gifts and sundries.

“We can take a look at the souvenirs while we’re at it.”

“Certainly!”

This was her first time going on a lengthy trip, so it was also the first time she would have the opportunity to buy souvenirs for people.

Miyo couldn’t hold back her excitement.

“Someone looks happy.”

“I am. I’m glad we’re here. It’s been so much fun.”

“…I wish I could’ve taken you somewhere a bit livelier.”

That way, there’d be so much more for her to see, and so much more for her to enjoy.

Kiyoka’s thoughts manifested on his gloomy face, prompting Miyo to give a flurried denial.

“Oh, no, not at all! I’m glad we’re here.”

“Sorry for being so spineless.”

It seemed that he was still torn up about putting her through the meeting with his mother.

Maybe bringing her here was also his way of trying to cheer her up and show he cared about her.

“Kiyoka, you’re not spineless, not at all… L-let’s go.”

Miyo suddenly grew embarrassed after the words had left her lips. Turning her burning face out of sight, she pulled on the sleeve of Kiyoka’s coat.

“R-right.”

They were both too bashful to meet each other's eyes.

An awkward tension hanging between them, the two entered the shop.

"Welcome."

The shopkeeper was a woman on the brink of old age. She glanced up at the couple who had entered, then she quickly turned back to the abacus in her hands.

The interior of the store was quite untidy and motley.

The goods for sale consisted of everything from foodstuffs to daily necessities, plus a variety of simple accessories and ornaments, and even some secondhand clothing. On top of all that, there were also souvenirs for sale, though there weren't many to choose from.

Despite its dusty smell and aged wooden frame, the small establishment had a vaguely cordial atmosphere.

"Hmm. I should've figured as much, but there's not much variety, is there?" Kiyoka muttered in a voice quiet enough that the shopkeeper wouldn't overhear.

This shop certainly wasn't a place you could call "refined" like you could the businesses in the capital. Not only was it small, but also the items on sale weren't very up to date.

Ignorant as Miyo was, she *had* been born and raised in the capital, so it was her first time in a store like this.

But I really like this sort of place.

It was far more relaxing than a trendy business.

"…This shop is quite amusing, wouldn't you say?"

"You think so?"

"Have you been in a place like this before, Kiyoka?"

“Yeah. Our unit ends up getting sent out of the capital a lot, like we are now.”

Apparently, the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit was typically assigned to missions in mountain hamlets or small farming villages—places where many folktales had been passed down through the ages.

As Miyo glanced around the store, something suddenly caught her eye.

They’re so cute.

Lined up on a shelf near the counter in the back of the store, where the shopkeeper was sitting, were a number of animal figurines carved from wood.

Dogs squatting on their hind legs, cats curled up for a nap, crouching rabbits, songbirds flapping their wings—a collection of adorable animals, each and every one of them small enough to fit in the palm of her hand.

“Catch yer eye, did they?”

Miyo glanced up at the remark and realized that the shopkeeper had started staring at her at some point.

“They did. They’re, um, very cute ornaments.”

“Think so…? Those ’uns are a common souvenir round these parts. An old standby.”

“Are they handmade?”

“Oh, you bet. Made from trees cut down up the mountain. Make ’em in the winter, when all the farm work’s on hold and there’s nothing better to do.”

The items were so meticulously made, Miyo couldn’t believe they were all carved by hand.

“Amazing,” she replied, her admiration naturally coming through.

“Gonna buy one?”

“…Can I?”

When she asked Kiyoka, who’d poked his head out from behind her, he nodded.

“Absolutely. Buy as many as you like.”

“I-I, um, couldn’t ask for that much…”

“Oh? Not gonna buy any of ’em, then?”

Giving in to Kiyoka’s expectant gaze, as well as the disappointment on the store attendant’s face, Miyo tentatively picked out one of each of the different animals lined up in front of her.

She paid the woman and put the figurines away in her drawstring purse.

“’Preciate yer business.”

“I’d like to check out, too. I’m looking to buy that item over there.”

To Miyo’s surprise, Kiyoka was pointing at a large sake barrel enshrined in the corner of the shop.

She thought it strange, wondering how he planned on bringing it back with him, but apparently some of the village youth would deliver it up to the villa for him later.

“Did the two of ya come out here from the capital?” the woman asked while she calculated the cost of the sake barrel.

“We did.”

“To own a huge mansion like that, ya must have plenty of money, then… There’s been some real ominous talk goin’ round lately, so both of ya be careful now.”

Ominous talk. Miyo and Kiyoka both looked at each other.

“What kind of talk?”

The woman’s face made it clear she thought it strange they were picking out that part of her statement to focus on.

Nevertheless, there was a chance this could be vital information related to Kiyoka’s assignment.

“I don’t know much about it myself, now. Men headin’ out to cut down some trees and sayin’ they saw a monster, suspicious strangers comin’ and goin’ from the run-down shack on the village outskirts. All sorts, really,” the women said, shrugging.

“…A run-down shack.”

Kiyoka stroked his chin in thought.

What form did these monsters take when they showed up? What happened when they did? What time had these encounters occurred? And what did the shopkeeper mean by “suspicious strangers”? Kiyoka wanted to press her for these details and more, but she didn’t look like she knew much more than that.

He would risk offending her if he interrogated her right then and there.

“We’ll be careful. Thank you for the warning.”

Kiyoka turned and walked back toward the entrance of the shop.

Miyo went to follow after him before she heard a “Wait a moment, now” from the woman and stopped.

“Hold out yer hands.”

“Hmm?”

She did as she was told, and a small item tumbled into her palms.

“Oh… How cute.”

It was the same type of handcrafted animal ornament Miyo had just purchased, in the shape of a turtle.

“A little extra for ya. Since you bought so much.”

“Oh, no, I couldn’t.”

It wouldn’t do to take it for free. When Miyo tried to pass it back to the woman, she smiled and stopped her.

“The two of you’re newlyweds, aye? Might not be much, but think of it as a wedding gift. Turtles are a good omen, y’know.”

Newlyweds.

Realizing that a total stranger had seen them that way, Miyo became too embarrassed to look the shopkeeper in the eye.

“U-um, why would you say that…?”

“That pure and innocent air about you two makes me feel ashamed for just lookin’ at ya. That husband of yers, he’s a keeper. An extra-handsome fella. You two get along now, okay?”

Unable to bring herself to clarify they weren’t quite married, Miyo managed to thank the woman in a voice quieter than the squeak of a field mouse. Then she quickly followed after the broad back, cloaked in long wavy hair, of the man who had started to leave before her.

Miyo was confident that their day-to-day life wouldn’t change much once they were married. Still, there was a definitive difference between being merely engaged and being husband and wife. Even Miyo knew that much.

I wonder if my heart’s going to burst when that day comes…

It was already thumping hard in her chest at present.

“Miyo. Finished?”

“Yes.”

Happiness. More than anywhere else, just being at Kiyoka's side warmed her heart and brought her peace of mind. She believed she was allowed with him.

But why, then, was her heart beating almost painfully fast?

My feelings for Kiyoka…

She loved him with her whole heart. Though she didn't understand just what sort of love she was feeling.

Miyo and Kiyoka returned to the villa after checking out the village.

They'd verified the location of the run-down shack the shop attendant woman had mentioned—a deserted house on the outskirts of town—but Kiyoka would investigate in full tomorrow, by himself.

He told Miyo that it would be too dangerous for her to accompany him.

"Welcome back."

Greeting the two at the door was Nae, a housemaid.

The old woman was married to Sasaki. Her distinctive thin eyes and gangly physique gave her a somewhat timid impression.

It appeared that the servants in this house consisted almost entirely of people from Sasaki's family.

In addition to Sasaki and Nae, the villa employed their son and his wife. The younger male servant was Sasaki's grandson. Besides them, there was also the chef, who was single, and another housemaid, a widow.

That was quite a large number of servants considering there were only two people, Tadakiyo and Fuyu, living here most of the time.

"Thanks."

“We’re back.”

When both Kiyoka and Miyo gave their replies, Nae squinted her already narrow eyes even further and smiled.

“You must both be tired.”

“Nae, is *she* going to be at dinner?”

The woman in question was surely Fuyu.

Nae immediately intuited who Kiyoka was talking about from the grimace of displeasure on his face. Her smile vanished, and she slowly shook her head.

“No. The mistress informed us she won’t be leaving her room for the night… And while I don’t wish to say why—”

“You don’t need to tell me. I’m sure she threw a tantrum about not wanting to share a table with Miyo, or some other foulmouthed nonsense. As revolting as always.”

“Pardon me. Once dinner preparations have finished, I shall call for you both.”

“Please do.”

After that, the two of them returned to their room and unpacked their luggage until it came time for dinner.

Just as Nae had said, Fuyu did not make an appearance, and the meal went by peacefully.

That being said, whenever Tadakiyo tried addressing Kiyoka, his son gave only curt, one-word answers. Miyo also did little more than respond to questions that came her way, so the bulk of the meal was taken up by Tadakiyo’s bright and cheerful personality.

Then, once dinner was over and she had finished her bath, Miyo was faced with a huge dilemma.

…There's only one bed…

She'd absentmindedly shrugged it off when they were first shown their room, but now she could no longer deny she would be sharing the space with Kiyoka. On top of that, there was only one bed between them. With everything that had happened earlier that day, she hadn't paid attention to the details of the situation.

Miyo got the feeling that they hadn't been given a single room simply because of a lack of availability. Indeed, there was another open guest room on the first floor, and other vacant chambers on the second.

Not only that, but there were two pillows neatly laid out on the wide bed.

D-does this mean I'm supposed to sleep in the same bed as Kiyoka…?

Her fingertips went cold with anxiety. The blood drained from her instantly.

What do I do? she asked herself over and over again in her head, but the answer never came. With neither a sofa nor a lounge chair in sight, the only places to sleep were the bed or the floor.

A-all I can do is have them prepare another room for me.

Of course. They weren't formally married yet, so she could simply say that she wanted separate rooms. Problem solved.

Thinking back, she remembered that when Sasaki had first met them at the station, he had called Miyo "Young Mistress." They were actually set to get married the following spring, so he might already have thought of them as husband and wife.

But, but, we're still only betrothed!

They didn't need to sleep in the same bed.

She didn't have anything to be nervous about. She would just leave the room and have them prepare a separate one for her. While Miyo regretted forcing extra work on the house staff this late at night, she found her current predicament even more troubling.

That was when, suddenly, her thoughts flew in a completely different direction.

I-it's not that I am particularly against sharing a bed with Kiyoka. I-I'm still not…emotionally prepared, is all. Oh no, what am I even thinking about? I'm so ashamed.

As pandemonium raged in Miyo's mind, the door to the room clicked open.

"…What are you getting so red and blue in the face about?"

"*Eep!* K-K-K-Kiyoka!"

Now that she thought about it, Kiyoka was the only person who would come in without announcing his presence, but that wasn't enough to stop her from jumping back with surprise.

Thanks to her guilty conscience, or her embarrassing fantasies, rather, she was ready to perish right there on the spot.

"What was that shriek for…?"

Her shame only intensified at Kiyoka's exasperated tone.

On top of that, she felt herself growing dizzy from catching a whiff of the faint scent coming off him, a different type of soap than normal.

In reality, it was Miyo's shame and panic making her dizzy, not the smell, but she didn't have the composure to realize it.

"I-I'm sorry!"

"I'm not trying to criticize you or anything. So why are you standing in the middle of the room stiff as a board, then?"

“Umm, well…”

She couldn’t possibly tell him that her imagination had taken off in a weird direction while she’d been fretting over the prospect of sharing a bed.

“…Um, it’s just, the bed…”

Kiyoka glanced over at the bed in question. Then it dawned on him why Miyo was trailing off and darting her eyes.

“Right. I bet Father had it set up like that, or Sasaki was reading into things in a weird way. It looks big enough, regardless, so we shouldn’t have a problem sleeping like normal.”

“Hmm?!”

Normal…? What exactly was “normal” supposed to mean?

Both of them lying side by side in the same bed. That alone was far beyond abnormal.

Kiyoka was the first person Miyo had ever shared a house with, but now he was like family to her. However, unmarried family members didn’t typically share the same bed, and she was far too old to be sleeping with her mother.

In which case, he must have meant “sleep like an average husband and wife.”

But that was something she absolutely wasn’t mentally prepared for.

We’re going to sleep together? Really?

It was impossible. Thoroughly impossible. Even if they simply lay down together side by side, she was sure to spend the entire night too nervous to calm down and sleep.

There were the events from that afternoon, too. She felt like it was somehow wrong to make up her mind about her feelings for Kiyoka

while Fuyu still didn’t accept her, and she still hadn’t done anything to fix that.

“Miyo?”

“I-I’m going to go have them prepare a separate bed for me after all…!”

Abandoning disorganized thoughts swirling around her head, Miyo fled from the room.

⚜ *CHAPTER 3* ⚜

Confrontation with Mother-in-Law

The next morning.

After Miyo had finished breakfast, Nae informed her that Fuyu was calling for her.

“Mother-in-law is?”

“Yes. She asked you to come to her room immediately.”

Nae smiled yet spoke with a dispassionate tone.

What should Miyo do? The first thing that came to her mind was confusion.

Kiyoka had left first thing after breakfast to investigate the deserted house they’d heard about yesterday. He’d also mentioned going into the village to ask around some more, so he was sure to be back late.

I said that I wanted to get along better with Fuyu, but…

It may have been rude to think this way, but given how the woman had acted yesterday, Miyo had no idea what Fuyu might say or do to her if she went to meet her alone.

It was unreasonable to rely on Tadakiyo’s support, and it would be risky for her to carelessly approach Fuyu right now without Kiyoka around.

And yet.

Nothing will change at all if I’m too frightened to approach her.

First and foremost, Miyo needed to act. This was ultimately a problem between her and Fuyu. She couldn't keep relying on Kiyoka to intervene. She needed to do as much as she could herself.

I need to show courage.

Miyo tightly clenched her fist.

She was sure it would work out somehow. Convincing herself of this, she answered, "I'll visit her now."

Nae quickly took her to Fuyu's room on the second floor. The housemaid knocked on the door and received permission to enter an instant later.

Fuyu's room was blindingly extravagant.

The furniture was all imported, framed in gold, and beautiful. Its detailed flower patterns and dainty designs caught the eye. The thick carpet was soft and plush, and elegant lighting, crafted with precision design, brightly illuminated the room.

The ceiling and walls were painted a feminine pastel pink. In the room's added light, Miyo could make out refined vine patterns on the walls. It was like a chamber straight out of a Western royal's palace.

Miyo found it overly bright and stifling. Her mother-in-law, who was gracefully reclining on an intricately designed chair, looked so grandiose that she might as well have been royalty from a foreign land.

Fuyu glared at Miyo then gave an order to Nae.

"Nae, bring me what I asked you to prepare."

"Right away."

Once the housemaid had left, Fuyu shut the fan in her hands with a loud snap.

"…Unbelievable. That son of mine will be the death of me, I swear. What a travesty for him to present such a meager girl past her prime as his fiancée."

Miyo had nothing to say back to her.

She would be twenty by the arrival of the New Year. Even if "past her prime" was a slight exaggeration, it was true she was long past the usual marriage age.

In both lineage and age, Miyo lacked the attributes she could use to argue she was a suitable match for Kiyoka.

"Not only that, but a *Saimori*, too. There's absolutely nothing to be gained from forming a relationship with a family like *that*."

Fuyu glared at Miyo as she continued.

"And on top of everything else, you are without a Gift, is that right?"

Miyo's shoulders quivered in surprise.

Actually, I do have a Gift…but…

She wasn't sure if it would behoove her to reveal that or not.

Miyo deliberated over whether to tell her mother-in-law of her Gift. Fuyu, meanwhile, seemed a little pleased that her insults had hit the mark.

A twisted smile appeared on her beautiful face.

"You're ugly and Giftless, hail from an unimpressive lineage, and aren't even smart enough to say anything back to me. What makes you think you're worthy of being a part of the Kudou family?"

"Um, well…I don't."

That was the only response Miyo could come up with to a question like that.

“My, my. You know that, yet you still shamelessly contemplate marrying Kiyoka? I don’t know if my son realizes it himself or not, but his feelings for you are plain sympathy. He pities you for being basically sold off by your parents and is simply looking out for you, that’s all.”

Miyo couldn’t help being convinced that Fuyu wasn’t entirely off base.

Though things were different now, she was certain that Kiyoka may have very well thought that way when she first started living with him.

While their conversation was going on, Nae returned.

“I’ve brought it, Mistress.”

“Give it to that girl, then.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Nae handed Miyo a plain navy kimono. The unadorned yet high-quality garment looked exactly like the ones that Nae and the other housemaids wore.

“This kimono…”

“Change into it immediately.”

Before Miyo could ask her why, Fuyu responded with a sneer.

“Why, wouldn’t you say it’s plenty for someone like you?”

“But…”

Miyo was currently wearing the kimono Kiyoka had bought for her from Suzushima’s. It was an extremely high-quality garment, of course, but more important, it was a gift from Kiyoka. That was why she treasured it.

Its price wasn’t the issue.

…But Fuyu still doesn't know anything about me. She won't be convinced by anything I have to say right now.

Miyo would have to get Fuyu to understand her first. To accomplish that, it would be faster and more reliable to convey that with her attitude instead of her words.

"I understand. I'll change."

She'd try doing exactly as Fuyu told her for the time being. That way she could understand Miyo and see just how serious she was about becoming Kiyoka's wife. Everything would start from there.

I want Fuyu to accept me.

If they spent time together, it was also possible she might discover something they could bond over.

Miyo excused herself, briefly returned to her room, and changed into the kimono. When she put it on, she was amazed.

This was the uniform of the Kudou family housemaids. The navy blue fabric seemed like it commanded quite a high price, and its smooth texture was pleasant to the touch.

It was so comfortable that she could scarcely believe it was for servants.

The Saimori servants had worn uniforms as well, but they were nowhere near as expensive as this. So ragged was the outfit Miyo had personally worn back then that it scarcely seemed clothing at all next to the kimono she'd just slipped into.

Amazing. The Kudous make sure to spend money on their servants, too…

Miyo was honestly impressed that even details like these varied so greatly between high-ranking noble families.

Fuyu seemed very pleased when she examined Miyo in her new outfit.

“My, my, that kimono’s a perfect fit for you, if I do say so myself.”

“Thank you.”

Miyo politely bowed her head.

The scene vaguely reminded her of life at her parents’ house. Back then, she’d heard that kind of biting sarcasm on a daily basis.

She worried that if she recalled everything, the pain would bring her close to tears, yet…

I wonder why…I don’t really feel sad at all.

She felt a bit nostalgic, but nothing beyond that. Meeting Kiyoka had slowly warmed her heart. Even now, being ridiculed as she was, her heart stayed warm.

“Well, you really are a natural, aren’t you? I guess I’ll just have you do some cleaning, then.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Have this girl work with the rest of you, Nae.”

The housemaid frowned slightly, unsure about Fuyu’s order.

“Mistress, are you sure this is a good idea…?”

“What? Are you refusing to follow my orders, Nae?”

“No, perish the thought. However, what will the master scion say?”

If this situation reached Kiyoka’s ears, he’d be absolutely furious, for starters. But Miyo didn’t want to keep relying on his help.

She had to do this to better comprehend Fuyu. He’d understand that if she talked to him. She was sure of it.

Resolved, Miyo raised her head.

“I’d be happy to do the cleaning.”

“Look, the girl said so herself. No need to hold back, Nae. Be sure to work her to the bone.”

Fuyu snapped open her fan and covered her mouth once again.

It was a graceful motion that left no room for debate. Miyo couldn’t have imitated it if she’d tried. It was as though Fuyu had drawn a boundary between them, emphasizing they would never be able to understand each other.

Miyo cheered herself up as she felt her heart start to sink, then she faced forward.

“I’ll be in your care. I promise to do my best.”

“Nae.”

“…Understood. Then may I ask you to wipe down the windows first?”

Miyo nodded at Nae’s hesitant request.

“Window cleaning? Right away.”

For the time being, Miyo was relieved she wasn’t being asked something impossible.

She had been nervous about being asked to handle something beyond her capabilities, but upon further consideration, she realized that servant work didn’t encompass anything unreasonable to begin with. She just needed to handle things like she did back in the Saimori house.

Miyo drew water into a bucket and soaked a towel.

Upon being ordered to start with Fuyu’s room first, Miyo only asked Nae where the cleaning supplies were before getting down to work.

She climbed a stepladder then began wiping the large glass window with the well-wrung towel. This would leave streak marks behind, so she used a dry cloth to absorb the moisture and polish the glass once she had wiped it down enough.

Fuyu closely observed Miyo's movements, scowling with displeasure the entire time. Occasionally, she would chime in to say something like:

"You missed a cloudy spot over there. Honestly, are even the simplest chores too much for you?"

Among other caustic remarks. Miyo would bow her head in response and apologize before summoning up even more effort to repolish the areas Fuyu indicated… This back-and-forth continued for the duration of the task.

The villa windows were larger and grander than those in the Saimori house and her current home, so it was somewhat difficult for Miyo to reach everything. Nevertheless, she polished the glass into a sparkling shine, from frame to crosspiece.

"Um, Nae. How is this?"

She called the woman over to have her look at the cleaned window.

The experienced housemaid widened her eyes and said, "Oh my." After inspecting every minute detail of the window, she nodded.

"A perfect job. Exceptional. What do you say, Mistress?"

"Hmph. Get her working on her next task. No need to give her any time to rest."

Miyo seemed to have passed the test. Unexpectedly hearing no abuse, Miyo heaved a sigh of relief.

From then until lunchtime, she handled one assignment after the other, without a moment's pause.

Wiping down the corridor windows and beating the dust out from the carpet. Cleaning up the washrooms, bathrooms, and other wet areas of the villa.

Fuyu would hurl insulting comments when she found occasion to come over and check on her. However, Miyo would apologize to her, diligently keeping her hands moving all the while.

As she worked, the villa's housemaids—Nae; her son's wife, Mitsu; and the widow Natsuyo—would take turns assisting her.

It really was different from the house she grew up in.

Though Fuyu insults me, she doesn't get physical.

Abuse aimed at disavowing Miyo's very existence, and slaps that came her way at a moment's notice.

Those had been daily occurrences when she lived together with her stepmother and half sister. The servants in the Saimori house would be very cautious when interacting with her and often treated her as if she were invisible.

Miyo couldn't condemn them for doing so. Their livelihoods were on the line, and they had seen for themselves that disappointing the mistress of the house would lead to an instant dismissal.

Compared to the Saimori household, where the atmosphere was always on edge, and there wasn't a hint of congeniality among the servants, the Kudou villa was totally different.

While it may have purely been because she didn't want to touch Miyo herself, Fuyu didn't get violent with her. The housemaids talked openly and cheerfully with her. On top of that, Nae and the others would sometimes voice their opinions openly to Fuyu. That would have been inconceivable in the Saimori residence.

"To be honest with you, Young Mistress…I underestimated your cleaning skills," Natsuyo told Miyo as they were both polishing the

bathroom tiles together. “Please forgive me. I thought the esteemed daughter of a well-to-do family would be far too pampered to do an adequate job.”

“Th-there’s no need to ask for forgiveness.”

Natsuyo hadn’t said anything outrageous in the slightest. Miyo’s family may have been in decline, but it was only natural to think the daughter of a noble family would be unable to handle household chores.

In fact, Hazuki often told Miyo that even after learning more or less everything there was to learn at girls’ school, she still couldn’t handle the chores as flawlessly as the servants did.

“Not at all… Please pardon me for speaking directly to you with such impudence. I was careless. I sincerely apologize.”

Perhaps Natsuyo had spoken out of line. But in another sense, it proved she was being sincere. She didn’t need to humble herself and repeatedly apologize for it.

If anything, her expression of remorse made Miyo feel guilty, so she silently returned to cleaning.

Although the bathroom hadn’t been particularly dirty to begin with, it was sparkling clean now that they had finished polishing it.

“My, the morning flew by.”

Now that she mentioned it, it was almost noontime. Miyo instantly thought that she then needed to help out with lunch preparations before remembering this house had its own chef.

“What will you do now, Young Mistress? Perhaps it would be best to ask the mistress—”

Right before the word “first” exited Natsuyo’s mouth, Nae poked her head into the bathroom.

“Young Mistress, the mistress is calling for you.”

“I-I’ll come right away.”

Miyo tensed up, mentally readying herself for anything Fuyu might say to her, before she headed off toward her mother-in-law’s chamber.

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I don’t believe it. Just what is it with that girl?

Though she’d ordered Nae to go summon Miyo to her, Fuyu couldn’t mask her frustration.

Kiyoka was a son Fuyu could be proud of. Handsome, accomplished in his studies, a strong head of the family, and a capable Gift-user, he had grown into a distinguished man she could put forward in any situation. It was fair to say he was Fuyu’s pride and joy.

That was why she’d always assumed that his wife would be an equally superb noblewoman. And yet…

He went and brought a girl like her *instead!*

From the time Kiyoka was a student, Fuyu had handpicked marriage candidates and sent them off to meet him on numerous occasions.

Every single one of them had been beautiful, flawless in both lineage and education. Though Kiyoka was difficult to please, she had assumed it would be easy for one of them to strike his fancy.

And yet. And yet.

Without exception, every candidate Fuyu selected had refused to marry Kiyoka. Sometimes, they would wind up furious or heartbroken that he had given them the cold shoulder. Other times, they would do something to provoke his ire, and he would break off the arrangement himself. The pattern repeated over and over again.

What was there about any of the girls she had selected for him to be so dissatisfied with?

With nothing going her way, Fuyu was sometimes unable to contain her irritation. Nevertheless, she couldn't be too upset that the son she was so proud of had high expectations for his future wife.

Thus, she'd redoubled her efforts into finding an even more outstanding gentlewoman. But as the years went on, Kiyoka grew only more and more stubborn.

Tadakiyo is as much to blame, too.

He was clearly out of his mind to have approached a girl like Miyo, a noblewoman in name only, about marrying Kiyoka.

When she'd first heard her name, Fuyu couldn't help cocking her head in confusion. The Saimoris were far beneath her attention.

Looking into them only proved they were hardly worth a second thought.

It was unpleasant to focus all her attention on such a worthless family of Gift-users, so she only had a rough overview of their circumstances. That alone was plenty.

They were bereft of money, power, and influence. The head of the family was utterly brainless, and Fuyu didn't need to investigate further to imagine the daughter of such a man was worthless as well. But escaping from her penniless home to the Kudou family and playing on Kiyoka's sympathies—this woman was pushing her luck.

Fuyu couldn't see Miyo as anything but a shameless hussy, taking advantage of the son she was so proud of, milking him for everything he had by garnering his pity.

How dare she.

She wasn't going to stand by and watch her precious boy be preyed on right before her eyes.

She needed to do whatever she could to make Miyo understand her position. With that in mind, she had forced her to work as a servant to hurt her pride.

And what happened? The accursed woman put on the servant uniform without any complaints and started cleaning as if it were absolutely nothing.

She couldn't be used to this, could she? No, Kiyoka's house has Yurie, so she obviously wouldn't be getting involved in any of the housework.

The Saimori family had enough money to employ servants of their own, so it would be no surprise if she'd never held a knife or wiped down a floor—a heartrending story of the poor putting on airs with what little luxury they could muster.

Fuyu grew even more discontent with Miyo's attitude, totally unaware of her drastic misconception.

"Excuse me."

She glared at Miyo as she quietly slipped into the room.

Her drab black hair was pulled back into a bun, and her physique was thin and shabby. She wore an absolutely dreary expression, as if she was trying hard to look as frail and delicate as possible. Fuyu was certain that behind Miyo's oh-so-unfortunate, oh-so pitiable facade, the girl was laughing her head off.

"Is the cleaning finished?"

"Yes."

"Why, you looked right at home cleaning the floor on your hands and knees, didn't you? Shameful and unsightly."

"…"

“Go on, say something for yourself. Spin the gears in that meager brain of yours.”

Fuyu expected running roughshod over the girl’s self-esteem would finally make Miyo show her true colors. But instead, she simply kept her head down and her lips shut tight.

“Um.”

Miyo finally opened her mouth to speak. Her eyes wandered about, as if lost, for a brief moment. Fuyu wondered what exactly she was going to say.

“Mother-in-law, I was actually, um, very impressed.”

“What?”

“I…I didn’t know. That families who reach the Kudous’ level of prestige give their servants such high-quality uniforms.”

What in the world was she talking about? Fuyu frowned.

“But of course. We would never allow any unkempt servants to be in our employ. Our dignity would fall into question if we didn’t have them look presentable.”

Servants they may have been, but they were more than just employees—they were a part of the household. The illustrious Kudou family couldn’t allow their possessions to be shabby and inferior.

Miyo’s inability to understand even the most fundamental of concepts exacerbated Fuyu’s irritation.

“You have some nerve trying to worm your way into the family without knowing something so basic…”

“My apologies!”

At Miyo’s overly zealous apology, Fuyu clamped her mouth shut.

What on earth was that faint sparkle she would get in her eye whenever Fuyu berated or insulted her? Fuyu was trying to show her contempt for the girl, yet her barbs were rolling off Miyo like water off the back of a duck.

"Say, do you truly understand what I'm telling you?"

"Y-yes?"

Miyo nodded. The overly innocent look in her eyes left Fuyu feeling as if she were doing something wrong.

I'm right.

Her son often got on her nerves and refused to do as she wanted, but she still had a motherly desire to protect him.

That was why she couldn't stand to have the woman before her marry into the family, in spite of the fact that Kiyoka himself wanted it and Tadakiyo had suggested the arrangement. She knew it was all too common for men to be fooled by women like her.

Marriage needed to be done properly. That was the duty of everyone born into a distinguished noble family.

"I'm saying that you're absolutely inadequate in every way! If you get that, then hurry up and disappear!"

Unconsciously growing heated, Fuyu leaned out of her chair and raised her voice.

"…That's not—"

"Not something you can do? Oh, I'm sure it isn't. After all, if you let Kiyoka keep protecting you, you'll be able to live like a queen, won't you? How truly base!"

"Th-that's not it…"

“Oh, I’m wrong, am I? In that case, what sort of advantage is there to marrying a girl like you? Greater than the mountain of disadvantages you come with, mind you. Go on! Tell me!”

Miyo cast her eyes down as Fuyu replied in thorough disdain.

The girl must have finally realized her feigned courage wasn’t going to work on Fuyu. It served her right. As soon as Fuyu rejoiced in her victory, however, Miyo once again raised her face up to her. Discomfort shot through the older woman’s veins.

“I…I don’t believe that I—that I have anything to offer in the areas you are talking about.”

She seemed to be choosing her words carefully. Yet her voice never wavered. Fuyu was getting fed up with Miyo’s vexing persistence, her perseverance.

Her irritation was finally starting to reach its limits.

“And?”

“I don’t…know what sort of value I have. But Kiyoka decided he needed me. That’s why…I won’t give up.”

“So? Why do you think that sort of naïve nonsense will be enough to convince me?”

Fuyu opened and closed her fan in frustration, making loud, metallic snaps.

Her initial suspicions had been confirmed; ultimately, this girl couldn’t exhibit any of the value Fuyu sought in a young noblewoman, and she possessed nothing of merit to bring to their family.

Meaningless time spent on a meaningless discussion.

She wouldn’t abide being frustrated by this piddling, shameless creature.

“As long as Kiyoka allows me to stay at his side.”

The moment Fuyu heard Miyo’s reply, the words her son had spoken the day before played back in her mind.

“I told you to say that one more time, Fuyu Kudou.”

“Mother? Don’t make me laugh. I’ve never once recognized you as my mother.”

“The next time you say anything to Miyo, I’ll kill you.”

Blood suddenly rushed to her head.

They were looking down on her, disrespecting her. Both Kiyoka and Miyo… They were writing Fuyu off as nothing more than the wife of the last family head, a woman who no longer held authority. That explained their insolent opposition.

Her mind went blank with white-hot rage.

“Don’t you dare try to make a fool out of me!”

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Miyo flashed back to a situation like this.

She steeled herself for a slap to accompany Fuyu’s piercing shriek. However, the raised palm of her mother-in-law never came down on her cheek.

“That’s enough.”

“Father-in-law…”

Tadakiyo was the one to stop Fuyu from lapsing into violence.

It seemed he had rushed over, for he was coughing fiercely and struggling for breath.

“Sorry about this, Miyo… Fuyu, I can’t condone this.”

Her father-in-law quietly reprimanded his wife as she glared at Miyo, her whole face crimson. At that moment, Fuyu's eyes were filled with nothing but rage for the girl.

"Taking me for a fool, over, and over, and over again! What gives *you* the right to look down on *me*?!"

"Fuyu."

"Leave my home at once! You—you insolent piece of trash!"

"Fuyu!"

Tadakiyo yelled out in a booming voice that belied his typical demeanor. Even in her rage, there was no question it reached Fuyu's ears.

Miyo timidly glanced over to see an uncharacteristically harsh expression on Tadakiyo's face, his gaze ice cold.

"Stop right there."

"Tada…kiyo…"

"Know your place. You have absolutely no authority over Miyo here. Cross the line, and I won't be able to protect you anymore."

His speech itself was the same as always, but confronted with his icy, assertive tone, Fuyu froze, fear coming over her face.

Silence enveloped the room for a moment, as if time itself had stopped. Then Tadakiyo broke the long, stifling quiet.

"*Phew.* I'm so sorry, Miyo. It looks like we've put you through a lot of trouble."

Despite not being personally scolded by Tadakiyo herself, Miyo found it hard to respond amid the tension.

"…It was all because of my own shortcomings. My apologies."

“No, you did a great job, Miyo. I should’ve been more careful myself,” Tadakiyo said. “I’m going to get an earful from Kiyoka again about this,” he added with a grin on his face, but his eyes alone remained unsmiling.

A chill rushed down Miyo’s spine. While it was a belated realization, Miyo now understood that, retired though he was, Tadakiyo had indeed once been the head of the Kudou family.

“I…I didn’t do anything wrong,” Fuyu mumbled feebly. Despite this, her hand had turned white from her viselike grip on her fan.

“Fuyu. I like that you’re honest about your feelings. But our capacity to avoid giving in to them is what makes us human.”

“Hngh!”

Fuyu gasped. Miyo, too, trembled with fear.

This must be…Tadakiyo’s face as the previous head of the family.

He seemed to love his wife. Both when they spoke at the main estate in the capital and when they arrived here at the villa.

And yet, was it normally possible to look the person you love straight in the eye and indirectly imply they were inhuman? If not, perhaps Tadakiyo’s love for Fuyu had totally disappeared at that exact moment.

It’s a bit terrifying.

He was easily capable of using his words to push the woman he loved down into the bowels of the earth. There was a chance Kiyoka had a side like this as well. A face that Miyo simply didn’t know about.

But even if that was the case, he wouldn’t hurt her easily, and she had no desire to leave his side.

Just then, Miyo started longing for Kiyoka's warmth again, so she clenched her cold fingertips to heat them up.

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Kiyoka had finished his breakfast and headed down to the village that morning. He was in agony.

Naturally, the events of the night before were to blame… Honestly, he hadn't thought for a moment that Miyo would overreact as much as she did.

When he thought back to her scampering off like a frightened rabbit, he couldn't help sighing.

Really, though, I'm the one who's thinking strangely about things here.

He had said something stupid.

At the time, he hadn't thought too deeply about it. But because his blurting things out had made the situation so much worse, even he felt baffled by his intensity in so casually talking about things the way he had.

The crunching sounds of his feet trampling over the earth had grown rough and intense.

Given Miyo's lack of refinement and her ignorance of the world, for better or worse, he had reason to imagine that things would've ended up that way.

Not that it serves as an excuse.

Tricking a woman, ignorant of the circumstances, and trying to lay a hand on her… Since when had Kiyoka become such a vulgar man?

Nevertheless, when he asked himself why he had tried to sleep in the same bed as her, he couldn't come up with an answer.

Tormented by his regrets, he continued walking on. Before he knew it, he had arrived at the village.

It was time to address the task at hand.

Letting out a slight huff, Kiyoka shifted his thoughts to his work.

He had already verified the eyewitness testimonies from the village in the written report. The first sighting had occurred around a month earlier, and reports of suspicious figures at the edge of town popped up one right after the other until they became the talk of the village.

That alone wouldn't warrant calling in the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit, but several days later…

A fiend showed up.

More precisely, some sort of humanoid with horns.

A single encounter could have been chalked up to someone's eyes playing tricks on them, but after that initial contact, the reported sightings of suspicious figures and fiends only increased in number.

There were no folktales or traditions concerning this type of creature in the region.

In other words, it was difficult to believe that a Grotesquerie taking the form of a fiend was a natural occurrence here. New Grotesqueries were seldom born in an area without some sort of basis or foundation in oral tradition.

If the eyewitness reports weren't the result of people just seeing things, that meant there was some sort of unique cause behind it all.

First place to start is that deserted house on the outskirts of the village, then.

Fiend or no fiend, Kiyoka knew for certain that a suspicious group was holed up in the shack outside the village, based on the

information from the reports and testimony from the store yesterday.

Even if Grotesqueries weren't involved, he could use his authority as a military officer to take the group into custody if need be.

Although he had verified the rough location of the shack the previous day, Kiyoka wasn't exactly sure how to get there. He needed someone from the village to guide him.

"Now, I never woulda thought ya to be a military man."

He visited the shop from the day before. He was going to have the old shopkeeper woman introduce him to someone familiar with the rumors in question.

Keeping under wraps the fact that the investigation was his original reason for coming, he'd simply revealed his military status, and to get her to cooperate, he told the woman he could provide some help.

"Sorry for the surprise."

"Nah, I don't mind. Yer looking into those strange rumors, after all."

The woman laughed dryly and guided Kiyoka to meet a certain man.

"One of the village youths, he is. I haven't really heard too many details, but I believe he's the first one to see the monster."

"I heard it was a fiend-like figure."

"Yeah, surprised ya know that. But now that ya mention it, people have been talking about it."

Conversing while they continued down the road, they started to head through the village proper, lined with small wood-built houses.

They passed several villagers along the way, each and every one of them regarding Kiyoka with suspicion.

Makes sense, I guess.

These sorts of communities were often very insular. They'd commonly be exclusionary and view outsiders harshly. Though Kiyoka had frequent opportunities to go into the field because of his work with the Anti-Grotesquerie Unit, he had struggled with this situation many times before.

Of course, it was thanks to experience that he'd developed a knack for dealing with this frigid reception.

To make matters worse, the particulars of the rumors going around had set the villagers here even more on edge. If the shop attendant woman hadn't tagged along, they'd likely be still too wary for Kiyoka to get his job done.

"All that being said…"

While he mulled this over, the woman at his side changed the subject with a grin.

"What about that cute little lady from yesterday? Yer not with her today?"

"No. I can't drag her into anything weird."

This was a genuine part of his job, and he couldn't expose Miyo to danger.

Kiyoka answered honestly, and didn't mean anything by it, but for some reason the woman laughed loudly back at him.

"*Ah-hah-hah.* Really are a good man, aren't ya? I'm a bit jealous of that girlie."

"…Is that so?"

"Oh, come now. If I was a bit younger myself, I'd be all over ya."

“I’m not…I’m not that great.”

Kiyoka thought Miyo was a well-rounded woman.

Yet he’d accidentally hurt her time and time again since she’d arrived at his doorstep. He wanted to be kind to her, yet things never went as he’d planned. In his mind, he was unbelievably pathetic.

Still, he couldn’t let Miyo go, nor did he want to. Kiyoka quietly averted his eyes as his thoughts swirled with complicated emotions.

“Well, here we are.”

The woman banged on the entrance to the house since it lacked a doorbell.

Someone called out from inside to ask who was knocking. When the shopkeeper responded, the resident at last appeared in the doorway.

“Morning… My word, I take my eye off ya a moment and ya turn into a mess.”

As the woman implied, the man poking his head out of his house looked quite emaciated.

His cheeks were hollow, and there were distinctive dark rings under his eyes. A stubbly beard grew on his face, his hair was equally disheveled, and he had a vacant look in his eyes. He was clearly not his usual self.

The man didn’t show the slightest interest in Kiyoka.

“Go away,” he whispered.

“I came here ’cause I have business with ya.”

“I don’t care, just go away! The fiend, I can’t get it out of my head.”

“There’s nothing to shout about.”

“Shut up. That sound, that sound just sticks in my ears… If I leave my door open like this, it might come find me…!”

As soon as he’d spoken, the man began trembling in fear, as if replaying the scene over in his mind.

Kiyoka had a hard time catching it, but he seemed to be muttering, “It’ll eat me, the fiend’s going to eat me,” over and over again. The man had seen a monster or was convinced he’d seen one.

“Pardon me,” Kiyoka interjected, taking a step forward past the woman to approach the man.

“You don’t need to be scared anymore. Calm down.”

He gently placed his hand on the man’s shoulders. This finally got the man’s attention.

“Wh-who are you?”

“Commander Kudou. I’m with the military. I came to look into the rumors going around town.”

“Military…a soldier…”

“That’s right.”

The instant Kiyoka nodded, the man clung hard to him in a baffling surge of strength,

“You gotta save me, Mr. Soldier…!”

There weren’t any major discrepancies between the man’s story and what Kiyoka had read in the report.

Suspicious figures, hiding out at an old shack on the village outskirts. A fiend sighting.

According to the man, the fiend was a large humanoid with two horns growing from its head. When you locked eyes with it, it would intimidate you by grinding its teeth together to produce a grating

sound. Like the other mysterious figures, however, it was covered in a full-body black cloak, so the man didn't know anything else about it.

"I was so scared, I went limp. When I came to, I was at the entrance of the village."

"Who moved you there while you were unconscious?"

The man shook his head from side to side at Kiyoka's question.

"I have absolutely no idea. But you gotta believe me. That fiend was going to eat me! Right then, something definitely attacked me!"

The man hugged his body tight, quivering in terror. His eyes went out of focus, as if he had descended into another state of panic.

It's going to be impossible to ask him to lead me to the shack like this.

Kiyoka abandoned the idea of having the man take him to the shack and explain what had happened.

After calming the man down, he decided to head to the deserted shack on his own. The shopkeeper gave him detailed instructions, and she saw him off at the edge of the village.

"Ya really fine going on alone from here?"

"Yeah. Sorry, I appreciate the help… It's dangerous, so here's far enough."

Parting ways with the woman, Kiyoka left the village for the time being. He was heading in the exact opposite direction of the Kudou family villa.

The boundary between the village and the mountain was vague. As soon as you left town, you immediately came upon the mountain slope. To get to the shack, Kiyoka needed to climb up the incline a

little ways before descending down in the opposite direction of the village.

He swiftly hiked up the slope without losing any breath.

Then, just as he'd been told, he started to hear the sounds of water coming from somewhere as he began to descend.

The shopkeeper said the shack was along a river.

That must have been the source of the noise.

He estimated the direction it was coming from then advanced straight toward it without hesitation.

A river quickly came into view through the gaps in the trees. Tracing his gaze upstream, Kiyoka spied a rotting shack; it looked ready to collapse at any minute.

That must be it.

It was old, but it was big enough to fit several fully grown adults without issue.

Carefully watching the surrounding areas as he moved, Kiyoka approached the shack. At the moment, there were no signs of life. It seemed no one was nearby.

Did they all leave? But where would they go?

Even if the group were just common outlaws, it didn't seem like there was any benefit to hiding out in a place like this.

In fact, they had aroused the villagers' suspicious, leading Kiyoka to be called out here. If these figures were people lying low after committing a crime, they were actually drawing attention to themselves. Almost as if they wanted to be discovered.

If that was the case, was there some reason that they had to be *here* in particular?

At any rate, it's strange. If that man is to be believed, it's almost as if humans and Grotesqueries are working together.

There were several examples of humans and fiends, spirits, ghosts, and other Grotesqueries coexisting.

Depending on the situation, they'd form contracts to establish a cooperative relationship. Kiyoka and his unit were very familiar with humans putting Grotesqueries to work for them.

In this instance, however, that simply wasn't enough to convince him. He couldn't dispel his uneasy feeling.

One question after another popped up in his head. Putting them aside, Kiyoka silenced his footsteps and approached within arm's reach of the shack.

At first glance, the place seemed deserted. He didn't hear any sounds, and there were no signs anyone was there.

He quietly peeked inside through the gap in the collapsed wooden slabs of the shack.

It was difficult to get a grasp of the full layout, but the interior looked to be in quite a disordered mess. Someone really was lodging here after all. Blankets lay on the floor, and food remains were scattered all around.

Kiyoka stayed on high alert and stood in front of the doorway.

Despite his caution over the possibility that a Gift-user had put up a barrier, there wasn't any evidence of trickery. Nor did he find any sort of physical traps, either.

When he tried stepping inside, there wasn't anything else he could figure out beyond the fact that someone was living there. Not a single lead or clue at all. He couldn't even tell for certain if the people living there were Gift-users or not.

If they did have supernatural powers, then he could understand the presence of the fiend.

When Kiyoka turned around to depart the shack, however, something caught his attention.

What's that?

He picked it up off the floor. At first glance, it seemed like an unremarkable black cloak, but the inside featured some type of needlework. A pattern had been embroidered on it in dark gold thread.

This design… Where have I seen it before…?

An upside-down sake cup. Arranged in a circle around it were *sakaki* trees wreathed in flame.

One look at this blasphemous design was enough to send a deluge of indescribable discomfort and anxiety through him. The upside-down sake cup was horrible enough, but depicting the tree of the gods—the *sakaki*—in flames was outrageous.

An organization becoming a pressing problem behind the scenes. One the government was frantically pursuing for treason against the emperor—

I think they were called the "Nameless Order"…

Though still relatively unknown to the world at large, this emergent religious group was growing into a significant problem for the government and the military.

Nothing was known about them—not their scale, their organization's true name, or their internal structure. The government had gotten up in arms about them recently after discovering this emblem somewhere.

The possibility that this is the order's headquarters…is a little unrealistic.

Not only did it stand out too much, but it was also far too small to be the base of their operations.

Unable to remain there for very long, he ultimately decided to return the cloak to where he had found it before exiting the shack.

It was possible that embroidered emblem would become an invaluable clue, but it would be troublesome if the people he was after realized someone had snuck into the shack. There was a chance the villagers would be suspected, and harm would come their way.

That was something he had to avoid at all costs.

Feigning ignorance, Kiyoka returned to the village and stopped by the shop.

When he entered, he found not only the shopkeeper, but also the young man who'd seen the fiend.

"Ah, you again. How'd it go?"

"There wasn't anyone at the deserted house. No humans, no fiends."

"Really…?" the man timidly inquired.

He seemed to have regained his composure. Though his face still looked pale, he showed no hints of the deranged confusion from earlier.

"Really. But there were signs that someone was staying in that shack. Best keep your guard up."

"You're with the military, aren't ya? Can ya nab those people and take 'em off our hands?"

"I can't capture what isn't there. I'm going to go at a different time and investigate further, so let me know if you see any movement."

"A-absolutely."

Kiyoka returned the man's nod with one of his own. Looking at him, the woman smiled.

"Same goes for you now. Even a soldier can't risk his life for nothing. Don't want to make that cutie of yers worry."

"I know."

Hearing this, Kiyoka suddenly grew anxious about leaving Miyo behind at the mansion.

His father seemed firmly on Miyo's side at the very least, but while he didn't think anything extreme would happen, there was no question the true head of the house was his mother.

Though he had warned Fuyu of crossing a line, she might still try to do something to Miyo.

…Hard to believe I'd be unable to focus on work like this.

He rubbed his brows, fed up that he was being such a coward.

If one of his men had been with him, he imagined he wouldn't have gotten so lax, but everything was up to Kiyoka's discretion here. He needed to do whatever he could to regain his focus.

Kiyoka expressed his gratitude to the shop attendant woman for her cooperation then decided to head back to the villa.

He realized that quite some time had passed since he'd departed that morning. Noon had long since come and gone.

To make matters worse, threatening clouds had descended on what had been a clear blue sky. The sky was overcast, thin gray clouds hanging low. Though he'd heard that mountain weather could change without warning, the drastic drop in temperature still caught Kiyoka off guard.

Following along the road he had taken in the morning, he slipped in between the rice fields. Then, as he approached the straight road through the forest to the Kudou villa, it happened.

…This presence.

He sensed someone wandering around nearby.

One explanation was they were someone from the villa, but Tadakiyo had said he had seen suspicious people about recently. The run-down shack had been deserted earlier, so it wouldn't be surprising if those outlaws were sneaking around here for some reason or another.

Kiyoka masked his own presence and carefully headed in the direction of the villa.

The suspicious signs of activity quickly grew more noticeable. Though the fact he was able to sense it so clearly signaled he was dealing with an amateur.

Nevertheless, he didn't let down his guard as his eyes scanned the area. It was then he caught a shadow in the corner of his eye.

Kiyoka did his best to keep his footsteps silent as he chased after the silhouette, but the ground was covered in fallen leaves. It was impossible for him to perfectly mask his footsteps.

Crunch. Kiyoka grazed a leaf, which let out a faint sound. He assumed that his mark had noticed him.

Not a problem.

If he was spotted, then there was no need to focus on being stealthy.

Making the split-second decision to bolt off, Kiyoka closed the distance between him and his target in the blink of an eye. Faced with Kiyoka's swift approach, the figure had no choice but to reveal themselves in the open.

“That cloak. So I was right.”

Kiyoka couldn’t make out the face of the shadowy figure. The large black hood they wore completely obscured it.

As he’d expected, the cloaked figure wasn’t particularly fast. Kiyoka never failed to complete his daily training exercises, and was a highly athletic person to begin with, so it didn’t take long for him to catch up with them.

“Gah…!”

“That’s far enough. You can’t escape anymore.”

He grabbed the figure’s wrists then twisted them up to restrain them. The area he grabbed felt somewhat hard and bony, leading Kiyoka to surmise the figure was male.

The cloaked man grunted as Kiyoka twisted his arms even farther then forced him to his knees. Kiyoka removed the hood on his head the next instant.

“Damn you…!”

The man gritted his teeth. Kiyoka didn’t recognize him. His face was dull and forgettable, and though he looked young, there wasn’t anything particularly noteworthy about his appearance.

However, his eyes seemed to glimmer with a sharp light.

“What…?”

All at once, the atmosphere turned unsettling—the kind that made all the hair on one’s body stand on end.

Something was odd. Kiyoka instantly pinned him down harder, but the man’s body suddenly flushed with intense heat.

As Kiyoka jumped back in shock, the man sluggishly lumbered to his feet. His face had completely changed from a moment earlier; all traces of his earlier expression had vanished.

His face was blank and absent any vitality, almost like a doll's.

What in the world?

The man remained expressionless as he raised his right hand skyward.

When he did, the dead leaves covering the ground all simultaneously blew up into the air.

"…a Gift?"

Kiyoka furrowed his brow at the supernatural sight, one that he was all too familiar with.

"PER…ISH," the man muttered with broken speech, forcefully bringing down his raised hand. With it, the leaves floating in midair suddenly fixed their aim at Kiyoka before launching toward him with blinding speed.

Kiyoka snorted slightly. What did this man take him for? Did he seriously think this child's play would be enough to kill him?

"Don't waste your time."

Right before the sharp points of the leaves reached him, they lost all their power and fell back to the ground.

Even then the man's expression remained blank, and he repeated the same movements again and again. However, not a single one of the leaves he sent flying managed to leave the slightest scratch on Kiyoka.

Seeing that things were going nowhere, Kiyoka again closed the distance between himself and the man. This time, he grabbed the man's arm, pulled him to the ground, and pinned him down.

"…Not sure if this will work or not."

Retrieving a talisman from his chest pocket, he recited an incantation and stuck it on the man's back. It was a charm for sealing

away Gifts, but there was no telling whether it would have an effect in this situation—because Kiyoka thought it likely that he wasn't a natural Gift-user.

With the talisman stuck to his back, the man convulsed for a moment before going totally limp.

"Looks like it worked. That must be a real Gift, then."

The man's aura had completely transformed when his expression changed. Almost as if he were someone else entirely. And the fact that he hadn't tried resisting Kiyoka the first time he was subdued suggested he wasn't originally a Gift-user.

Kiyoka had never seen such a phenomenon before.

If he were to describe it, the man's demeanor when using his Gift closely resembled what someone looked like when they were possessed by something inhuman. If that was the case, though, his Gift-sealing talisman shouldn't have been effective.

"Just what exactly is going on here?"

Openly expressing his bafflement, Kiyoka frowned while he looked down at the unconscious man below him.

⚜ *CHAPTER 4* ⚜

Circling Emotions

Evening was setting in. Upon receiving word that Kiyoka had returned, Miyo rushed to the entryway.

"Welcome back."

"I'm home."

She greeted him with the best smile she could. Kiyoka looked relieved, grinning back broadly and gently placing his hand on Miyo's head.

However, she couldn't help being startled by the chill of his palm.

"Kiyoka, your hand is very cold."

"Oh… Sorry. Does it bother you?"

"No, um, it's not that."

Miyo softly wrapped both her hands around Kiyoka's as he tried to pull it away.

"…I'm worried."

Kiyoka might not have realized it himself, but he had a very grim look on his face. His body seemed to be chilled to the bone, too, and Miyo wondered just how far he had pushed himself.

"There's still some time until dinner. Let's get you to a warm room to relax."

Kiyoka's eyes widened as Miyo ardently spoke, making sure that she absolutely got her way.

"…Uncharacteristically pushy, aren't we?"

“Huh?”

Was she really being that assertive? She did admit, though, that in this instance, she refused to give any ground on the issue.

As she reflected, Miyo then realized she had grabbed Kiyoka’s hand herself.

“Wh-what am I…”

She acted so audaciously without even thinking about it. The self-awareness made her embarrassed, and her cheeks grew hot.

“I-I’m s-sorry!”

It was Miyo’s turn to retract her hands back in a panic. While she knew that Kiyoka wouldn’t get angry at something trivial like this, she still apologized immediately, unable to bear the situation.

To make everything worse, she could hear Kiyoka chuckling, which fanned the heat in her cheeks even further.

“Your hands are nice and warm.”

“Th-thank you.”

“Let’s go. Relaxing in my room, right?”

Kiyoka took Miyo’s hand to pull her along as she remained unable to shake herself from her fluster.

What was she supposed to do? Her heart beat like a drum in her chest.

Every time she’d look at their joined hands and feel his warmth travel through her, an unknown emotion welled up inside her that was more than she could bear. She sensed she was thinking too hard about things she didn’t need to worry about, while also conversely feeling like her thoughts were totally empty.

Trying to escape from her embarrassment and self-consciousness, Miyo spiritedly got to work attending to her fiancé once they were back in his room.

She brought a blanket, brewed warm green tea for him, and added logs to the fireplace.

“Kiyoka, would you like me to draw the bath for you, too?”

“No, that’s fine. Just calm down a bit.”

Her fiancé’s admonishment brought her to a halt. Apparently, she was being *too* hectic. She wanted to crawl into the nearest hole she could find.

Miyo dejectedly slumped her shoulders and went to sit herself down in the chair opposite Kiyoka.

But being told “Wait,” she stopped and cocked her head.

“Here. Sit over here.”

Kiyoka lined up two chairs right next to each other in front of the fireplace and, sitting in one of them, pointed toward the other.

Although she tried to refuse, thinking she couldn’t possible be so bold, the look in Kiyoka’s eyes told her he was completely serious. They seemed to decisively cut off her objections, as if to say, *You don’t think you’re going to defy me, do you?*

Unfortunately, Miyo didn’t have the power to go against him.

No, on second thought…

I never once thought this was “unfortunate” at all.

If anything, she was happy…or something close to that. At the very least, she hadn’t the slightest desire to oppose Kiyoka’s request.

Still hesitating, she meekly sat down beside him.

When she did, he spread out the blanket Miyo had grabbed for him. “Come closer,” he told her, wrapping Miyo up completely in the blanket with him.

Their bodies were joined tightly at the side, almost melting together at the point where they touched.

Mere moments after she’d quieted her heart, it frantically started beating again.

“K-Kiyoka.”

“What?”

“Um, well, um.”

“Don’t struggle. Just sit nice and quiet.”

The words sounded like something a kidnapper would say, but Miyo didn’t even have the presence of mind to question them.

“B-but still.”

Why did he want to bring Miyo under the blanket with him, too? Even if she’d wanted to ask him, at that point the pounding of her heart was so loud, it would drown out the answer he gave.

“It’s warmer this way, isn’t it?”

“Th-that’s true…”

She was unable to come up with any other reply, so silence fell over them.

Just sitting there, Miyo couldn’t stop her attention from focusing on Kiyoka’s body beside her. Not because it was unpleasant, of course… If anything, this was because it was the opposite.

She wasn’t sure how long they stayed like that.

Kiyoka casually broke the silence.

“How was it today?”

Miyo obviously knew what Kiyoka's objective was in asking the question.

How had she spent the day? Had anything happened between her and Fuyu? With how things had played out the day before, obviously the questions would be on his mind.

Just as Miyo was concerned about Kiyoka, so, too, was Kiyoka concerned for Miyo.

"Oh, um, well…"

She had known he was bound to ask, but she hadn't prepared a good answer.

If she spoke honestly about what had happened, Kiyoka would likely get upset on her behalf again. But this was a problem between Miyo and Fuyu alone.

Still, I don't want to hide things from him, either.

She had learned well enough that, in moments like these, nothing good came from hiding her feelings. On the other hand, she was conflicted, because she wanted to resolve the situation herself.

In truth, back in Fuyu's room, she had wanted Tadakiyo to wait a little bit longer before intervening.

That being said, it would have been too late if Fuyu had injured her. If that had happened, her relationship with her mother-in-law would've become awkward and unpleasant. Ultimately, Tadakiyo's timing may have been perfect after all.

Maybe it was selfish that she wanted to resolve things solely through her own efforts, when she didn't possess any strengths herself.

"Miyo."

Kiyoka placed his big, firm hand over her own as she sat in his lap.

She was sure that Kiyoka easily saw through her attempt to try hiding things from him. No matter how she tried to deny it, her only option was to be up front with him.

"…Will you listen without getting mad?"

"Depends on what you have to say."

"Then…I can't tell you."

"Started standing up for yourself, huh?"

Kiyoka gave a resigned sigh, sensing Miyo's firm, unyielding resolve.

"I won't get mad, so go ahead and tell me."

"Okay."

Urged on, Miyo faltered as she began to relate the events following breakfast that morning.

Ultimately, after what happened—when Tadakiyo intervened to mediate things between Fuyu and Miyo—she had been sent back to her room and stayed there quietly.

She wanted to talk to Fuyu one-on-one. While that may have been her wish, once Tadakiyo had stopped them, she couldn't force the issue. If she displeased her mother-in-law again, it would just cause more trouble for him, too.

But Miyo still had absolutely no intention of giving up now.

While she relayed the full account of what had happened, the air around Kiyoka grew gradually more precarious, and by the time she had finished talking, he looked on the verge of declaring to Miyo that he was going to wring his mother's neck.

Though the room should've warmed up by now, it made her body shiver.

"That woman…," Kiyoka murmured in a low rumble.

At this rate, he really was going to kill his mother. The picture of the scene, which seemed close to becoming reality, flashed across Miyo's mind. She vehemently argued in a panic.

"Kiyoka. Um, I wasn't going to be able to just sit here idly… And Fuyu didn't ask me to do anything unreasonable, either. Your father also came in to stop her for me, too."

"That's not the issue."

In that case, what *was* the problem?

"You don't get it?" Kiyoka responded to Miyo's confusion, laying his anger bare. "Of course, pushing you around however she pleased is infuriating enough, but… It's more than that."

Miyo felt Kiyoka's hand squeeze down hard on hers.

"She tried to harm your dignity as a human being, out of spite. That's something I absolutely cannot stand for."

"Dignity…"

The completely unforeseen reason for his anger brought Miyo even more questions.

As far as she was concerned, she didn't have any "dignity" in the first place.

Ever since she was born, Miyo had never once thought anything inside her was precious or sacred. Similarly, the thought had never saddened her, either.

She didn't exactly understand what the "dignity" Kiyoka spoke of really referred to.

"…It's fine if you don't really get it. But the fact is, I won't let it stand."

Quietly casting his eyes down, Kiyoka looked more pained by the events than Miyo herself. Still, she felt grateful he'd gotten so upset on her behalf.

"It's exactly like Mother-in-law said; I can't do anything."

"That's not true."

"No, it is. I've learned a number of skills from Sis…and there are some among them that I've mastered. But I'm not worth much by myself. I'm sure that…no matter how hard I try from here on out, I'll never be of much importance."

Miyo possessed none of the building blocks crucial to a daughter of a noble family. There was a limit to how much she could compensate for with effort alone. The more she learned under Hazuki's tutelage, the more she came to realize just how ignorant of the world she was, how incompetent she was.

Nevertheless, Miyo wanted to believe there was something, anything, that she could still achieve. Something that would touch another's heart and change their life forever, like when Kiyoka had decided to choose Miyo once and for all.

"Kiyoka. Thank you for getting angry on my behalf. I know this isn't what you want to hear, but will you keep watch over me just a little while longer? I want to face Fuyu on my own."

"How long is 'a little while'?"

"Until I give up, if possible… Is that okay?"

Miyo had to hold back her smile at Kiyoka's attitude, reminiscent of a pouting child.

But that peaceful, friendly mood was blown into the wind instantly.

"Will you give up if I say no?"

Kiyoka buried his head in Miyo's shoulder. She couldn't see his face at all, but his entire body, from head to toe, was far warmer than it had been a moment ago.

Miyo's voiced nervously cracked as she answered.

"I-I'm not g-going to give up."

"…Even if I say that my concern for you is making me unable to focus on my work?"

"Um…I want you to be able to focus on your work."

Why was it, she wondered? It made her somewhat happy to hear this.

Miyo's truest feelings were that she always wanted him by her side. Facing Fuyu was scary, and if she could get along by avoiding the situation, she would've wanted to. But if she did that, nothing would be solved.

After a little while, Kiyoka heaved a long sigh.

"I lose confidence when you're around."

"I'm, um, sorry."

She couldn't come up with anything else to say. Kiyoka lifted his head up and smiled at her, despite his troubled, drooping eyes.

"I don't mind. You should do what you want, how you want."

"Thank you…!"

Miyo nodded emphatically, and a heartfelt smile spread across her face.

She was sure they'd come to understand each other. Constantly worrying herself over Kiyoka, Fuyu didn't appear to be a mean person by nature.

Miyo was going to see Fuyu whether she was called to her room or not. That's what she resolved to do.

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It was only Kiyoka and Miyo at dinner that night.

Fuyu claimed she was feeling unwell and didn't show herself. According to the servants, Tadakiyo was staying by her side.

Watching Miyo innocently sample the Western food–focused meal with curiosity, Kiyoka felt a little relieved.

I think that I was probably scared.

If his mother hurt her, and Miyo closed her heart to the world yet again, then it would ultimately be Kiyoka's fault for bringing her here after neglecting Fuyu for many years, despite knowing how troublesome she could be.

After the meal was over, he parted ways with Miyo, who said she was going to take a bath.

The mansion's large bathing area was the real deal. It was fed by an actual hot spring, and the baths were gender segregated. Miyo seemed to have grown quite fond of it.

Kiyoka himself, meanwhile, quickly jotted down the results of his work for the day into a report before getting an impulse out of the blue to head to the cigar room.

The villa's first floor was equipped with a fairly large cigar room. Both Kiyoka and his sickly father weren't smokers, however, so it was wholly for guest use.

"There you are. I was waiting for you, Kiyoka."

"You sure you should be drinking alcohol?"

“Not really, but I thought it’d be nice to share a drink and a heart-to-heart with my son for a change.”

Tadakiyo was sipping from his lone sake cup in the cigar room, casually dressed in his leisure kimono.

Cigars were mainly a male interest, so women didn’t generally come to the room at all.

Kiyoka figured that if Tadakiyo wanted to talk to him, this would be where they did it.

“Please. And just so you know, I haven’t forgiven you.”

Kiyoka sat himself down in the row of chairs, leaving one extra between him and Tadakiyo. When he picked up the extra cup, his father personally poured some sake for him.

“…Miyo isn’t too depressed, is she?” Tadakiyo asked with a melancholic look, showing no particular reaction to his son’s words.

Kiyoka tilted back his cup and slowly swallowed the sake. The local brew he’d bought from the store the day before went down smoothly, with a subtle sweetness.

“She wasn’t depressed… She’s all too accustomed to being hurt like that. To the point where she’s not really sure if she’s been hurt or not.”

“That right? Really did her wrong, then.”

Kiyoka had hated this part of his father for a long time.

Beneath that cheerful smile of his lurked coldhearted cruelty. He never revealed how he truly felt. He’d behave as if he loved his family, but in reality, he didn’t have much interest in them at all.

Though he had voiced his regrets just now, deep down he didn’t feel that way in the slightest.

“It’s always just lip service with you.”

Kiyoka's childish criticism slipped out without him realizing it. Even though he had long since given up on expecting anything from this father of his.

Tadakiyo's genial smile looked downright creepy.

"You know, Kiyoka. I really do regret it all. That I neglected the family and the house."

Saying he was busy was no excuse. Yet Tadakiyo grumbled, still wearing his Noh-mask smile.

…Kiyoka's father had been born with a weak constitution.

It happened once in a while with Gift-users in families who had inherited a powerful Gift. Their body wouldn't be able to keep up with the Gift's power. Even if they were strong enough to live normally without any supernatural powers, their bodies screamed in pain by virtue of their mighty Gift.

Kiyoka also knew that his father had endured much hardship because of this. The Kudou family was peerless. Despite his weak body, he had to protect their position and make sure other families didn't disrespect them. He tirelessly worked harder than anyone else to fulfill his role.

The same went for his mother. Though she was short tempered and had extravagant spending habits, she'd been an excellent mistress of the house. Besides, her taste for luxury was no obstacle in a family as rich as the Kudous.

Tadakiyo was so busy that he'd had no option but to entrust everything in the house to Fuyu. Kiyoka could understand that, too.

His pent-up feelings naturally spilled over into a sigh.

"…Arguing over the past is just a waste of time."

Tadakiyo forced a smile as Kiyoka reluctantly cut the topic short.

“That’s true. So let’s talk about something constructive. How about that man you captured; were you able to get anything out of him?”

“He told me that the Nameless Order is really called the Gifted Communion. It’s also highly likely that the man himself was severely brainwashed, or under some sort of powers of suggestion.”

Kiyoka had confined the man he’d captured in the villa’s basement and interrogated him.

To avoid scaring Miyo or the servants, he pretended to come home in the evening, but he had actually been underground in the basement from just after noontime.

The man’s words had been vague and incomprehensible from start to finish.

When asked about his usage of that Gift-like power, he claimed it was from God and asserted that someone like himself couldn’t possibly understand the principles behind such a sacred power.

Then when Kiyoka asked about this mysterious order, the man insisted that they were holy teachings and that anyone who didn’t understand this was a wicked hindrance to the creation of an equal society and human evolution.

He didn’t say anything substantial.

Kiyoka thought that the man might have been deliberately dodging his questions, but even then, his behavior was strange. His emotional oscillations were extremely small. Despite being captured and arrested, he didn’t show the slightest hint of fear or unrest.

“The Gifted Communion, huh? Quite an ominous name for us to hear.”

Since information was shared with all Gift-users regarding the Nameless Order, even someone long removed from active service like Tadakiyo was in the know.

The word *Gifted* was in the cult's true name, so it was possible it had some relation to Gift-users in general.

"At any rate, I need to coordinate with the capital. I've already sent a familiar off, so there should be some response either tomorrow or the day after."

Kiyoka was purely on a military mission to investigate the recent happenings nearby. However, now that things had escalated to the point where the government needed to be called in, it would no longer be wise for him to act on his own discretion.

It was a nuisance, but until he had his orders, it seemed like he would need to curb his use of force and concentrate on investigating and keeping watch over the area around the village.

"Hmm. That's right. Seems clear that the guys wandering around the villa are part of the same group, too."

Tadakiyo nodded, slowly sipping his sake.

"If push comes to shove, I might…ask you to look after Miyo."

"Oh, and what do you mean by that?"

Kiyoka glared sharply in response to his father's teasing question.

He knew Tadakiyo was just playing dumb, but his joke was in poor taste.

"These guys are clearly wary of this house—of our family. There's no knowing if something will cause them to bare their fangs."

Considering they were going out of their way to survey the situation here, it was plenty possible. Should that happen, however, Kiyoka wouldn't be able to respond as freely as he would have liked because he was a public servant.

"To think the day would come when you'd rely on me for something like this."

“What, is that a problem?”

“Not at all. Just made me think that…you really do love Miyo, don’t you?”

Kiyoka gazed at him, baffled.

For a second, his brain hesitated to actually comprehend what his father had said to him.

Love…?

To say he hadn’t been expecting that was an understatement; Kiyoka was shocked, bewildered, even at Tadakiyo’s suggestion. That was how alien concepts like *love* and *romance* were to Kiyoka.

He had never thought deeply about his feelings for Miyo.

Well, I did get the sense I had something like…compassion, or affection, for her.

Unconsciously, he brought his hand up to his mouth and sank into an ocean of memories. Although he sensed that Tadakiyo could perceive the thoughts swimming through his head, Kiyoka wasn’t in a state of mind to pay attention to his father.

He held feelings of love, the kind that formed between a man and a woman, toward Miyo.

It was undoubtedly a shocking truth to arrive at. Still, strangely, it also felt like it was a perfect fit.

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The Imperial Palace, the capital.

The information procured from Kiyoka Kudou, the commander of the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit who was currently out on a field mission, spread quickly through the government and the military headquarters.

Hence, the related parties were all working in a hurry despite the fact that the sun was low in the sky.

And despite its outwardly tranquil atmosphere, the Imperial Palace was no exception.

Now he's done it…

Arata Usuba, the successor of the Usuba family, had been called to the imperial residence of Prince Takaihito, representative to the reigning emperor.

Clad in a high-quality dark gray three-piece suit, Usuba had headed here straight from his office, the trading firm operated by his family's estate.

Treading over the gravel of the walkway, he let out one despondent sigh after another as he headed over to his destination.

Why is it that whenever that man's involved, he always gets caught up in trouble?

Arata's feelings toward his cousin's fiancé, Kiyoka, were complicated.

Thanks to the new information Kiyoka brought regarding the Nameless Order, aka the Gifted Communion, the central government was in utter chaos. This had spurred Takaihito to summon Arata, who still had no clue as to what was going on.

Why, after going out to investigate a simple Grotesquerie sighting, did Kiyoka end up getting involved with a religious order planning to rebel against the emperor? It was utterly incomprehensible.

A servant waiting deferentially received Arata upon arriving at his destination.

"We've been waiting for you, Master Arata."

"Lead the way."

“As you wish.”

Following behind the aging male servant, Arata was led into the audience chamber in the deepest part of the residence.

“Pardon me. Master Arata has arrived.”

When the servant made his announcement through a paper sliding door, Takaihito called out from the other side, granting them permission to enter.

Arata slowly pulled back the sliding door and quietly entered the room. These movements were natural and automatic, a product of the etiquette that had been drilled into him from a young age as the Usuba family heir.

“Prince Takaihito. Arata Usuba, at your service.”

“Glad to see you, Arata.”

The same beautiful personage as always. Sitting in a dark blue ceremonial court dress tailored from the highest-quality silk, with his otherworldly and beautiful features. No matter how many times Arata laid eyes on the prince, he couldn’t believe he was actually real.

“Prince Takaihito, with the humblest respects—”

“Our time now is precious. We shall save the leisurely greetings for a later date.”

It was rare for Takaihito to hastily move the conversation along, so Arata’s eyes widened in surprise.

Rushing, *panic*, and similar words all seemed totally foreign to Takaihito. And indeed, they actually were. The fact he had hurried on to the topic at hand signaled the gravity of the situation.

“I shall get straight to the point. Arata, I ask you to make for the Kudou villa posthaste.”

“What.”

“You have an objection?”

No, that wasn’t really the issue.

The august individual in front of him appeared to see through Arata’s bafflement, and an awkward, tepid atmosphere developed between them.

“I understand. Nevertheless, you are the proper person to handle this task. Go, and you shall understand,” Takaihito said, before appending a “probably” to his statement with what appeared to be a smile.

Arata figured that, as long as Kiyoka was there, that would be more than enough fighting strength. Even when accounting for whatever sort of hidden trump card these Gifted Communion people had up their sleeve.

In which case, it was the Usubas’ Gift that was needed here. That was the only explanation Arata could come up with for why he was being sent to Kiyoka.

“Though I did say posthaste a moment ago…I realize the day has grown late. Once you have exchanged information with the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit tomorrow, you can set out the following morning. That will do,” Takaihito said.

“An awfully detailed itinerary.”

“Hmm. Speaking truthfully, even I do not yet understand what is going on… However, it is clear that sending you out to see him is the best course of action.”

There were often times when Takaihito’s statements were very abstract. Nevertheless, since he was the wielder of the Divine Revelation, his words were absolute. Arata had no reason to oppose them right now.

It was thanks to Takaihito that the Usubas were beginning to be freed from their plight. A joyful change for both Arata and his family.

Takaihito was a lord worth serving with his heart and soul. That was certain.

“Understand, Arata?”

At Takaihito’s question, Arata deeply bowed his head to the floor.

“Absolutely, Prince Takaihito. As you wish.”

It was then, somewhere in the back of his head, he had a foreboding thought.

That in order for the Usuba family to continue to change, there were people and a past that they would need to confront.

—as well as the results of such confrontation, which would endanger the Usubas’ very survival.

⚜ *CHAPTER 5* ⚜

Something Closing In

I will face Fuyu.

The next morning, she swore this to herself.

Kiyoka, Miyo, and Tadakiyo finished their breakfast together before both men went off to their work.

Miyo didn't really know where her father-in-law was headed, but her fiancé was investigating the unnatural phenomenon just as he had yesterday.

"Kiyoka, please make sure you don't push yourself too hard," Miyo reminded him when she saw him to the entryway. Kiyoka smirked slightly.

"Yeah. I should be the one telling you that, though. You better not do anything reckless now."

"I won't."

She looked him straight in the eyes and shook her head, but for some reason, he stared back at her dubiously.

"…I'm serious."

"I know. I'll be okay."

"All right. Please, learn to be more attuned to your pain. For me…"

"Huh?"

What exactly did he mean? There were times when the things Kiyoka said were too abstract for her to understand.

He turned around, exasperated.

“I’m off.”

“Okay. Take care.”

Waving her small hand, Miyo watch Kiyoka depart until his retreating figure vanished behind the door.

After the door had closed, she psyched herself up by giving both of her cheeks two light slaps.

All right, I need to head to Fuyu’s room.

According to Kiyoka, their stay at the villa would be over in another two to three days.

It made sense. He was an important figure in charge of a whole military unit. He went out on field investigations only under exceptional circumstances, and he obviously couldn’t afford to be away from the capital for very long.

If there were only a few days left of their time there, however, that meant Miyo had fewer opportunities to talk to her mother-in-law.

When she thought back over the flat-out rejection she’d received on the first day, and then Fuyu’s demeanor on the second—yesterday—she felt both her emotions and the pace of her steps naturally grow heavier.

She had the feeling it would be utterly impossible to get the woman to open up her heart to Miyo in just two odd days.

No, no, stop. I have to stay strong.

When she thought about it, she hadn’t even properly greeted Fuyu and introduced herself yet. If she went back home with things unresolved, she knew she’d regret it.

The villa was different from the Saimori home. There was kindness and compassion here. Just a look at the faces of all the servants was enough for her to tell. She didn’t see a clouded look on any of them.

That’s why she was sure things would go well.

Convincing herself of this, Miyo stood before Fuyu’s room. She took a deep breath and knocked on the door.

“Mother-in-law, it’s Miyo.”

It was possible Fuyu wouldn’t even let Miyo into her room if she announced herself honestly. But she couldn’t think of any other way in.

Surprisingly, she heard the words “Come in” echo from inside the room.

“Pardon me.”

Miyo carefully entered the room then gasped in surprise.

Fuyu was atop her bed. Despite how energetic and lively she’d looked yesterday, her complexion was now sickly, and she wore a completely sullen expression. The pale-colored pupils she turned Miyo’s way had lost all their strength as well.

“Mother-in-law, are you feeling—”

Before she could finish her question, Fuyu cut her off.

“What are you here for?”

“U-um, well, I…”

“…Go ahead and laugh if you want.”

Why in the world would Fuyu talk about laughing in a situation like this?

What was she thinking? What sort of emotions was she feeling? What could Miyo do to understand her? Regrettably, Miyo was at a loss as to how to answer such questions.

“I don’t understand. There’s nothing amusing at all, so how could I laugh?”

“No need to try keeping appearances now. With how things have played out, why, you must be on cloud nine, no?”

“I couldn’t possibly…”

It was plain enough even for Miyo to realize. Fuyu was definitely misunderstanding something.

Unfortunately, she didn’t know what Fuyu was mistaken about, and she didn’t have any guesses about how to clear things up.

Miyo summoned up all her courage and approached the bed. As she did, Nae, waiting at Fuyu’s bedside, greeted her with a simple “Hello” and prepared a chair for Miyo.

“Mother-in-law, are you feeling unwell?”

“Indeed I am. All thanks to you.”

Though she replied to Miyo’s question, she remained brusque.

“Were you able to have breakfast?”

“No. Your face came to my mind. It was so detestable, it made me sick.”

“…Do you hate me, Mother-in-law?”

“Yes, more than anyone else in the world.”

Hearing Fuyu say that to her face made Miyo depressed.

“*More than anyone else in the world.*” Just how was Miyo going to reverse Fuyu’s impression of her? She felt lost enough to cry on the spot.

“What can I do to make you not hate me anymore?”

This sort of foolish question wouldn’t fix things, either. But she couldn’t think of any other way forward.

“I hate everything there is to hate about you. And there’s absolutely no room for improvement whatsoever.”

“B-but.”

“It’s your fault that Tadakiyo scolded me. If I end up losing his favor because of this—”

“Huh?”

“Anyway, you’re an eyesore, so make yourself scarce. Having you here will only make me feel worse.”

Miyo panicked internally as Fuyu waved her away.

She hadn’t yet resolved anything. At this rate, their conversation would end with the only thing made clear being Fuyu’s hatred for her. While confirming it for herself was likely necessary, nothing would come from learning that alone, and she’d be unable to move forward.

She couldn’t ruin this perfect opportunity.

Asking her to talk things out together a little longer isn’t going to get anywhere…

Ultimately, Fuyu was feeling unwell. If Miyo stayed by her side constantly trying to talk to her, even for idle chitchat—though it was definitely more than that—she wouldn’t be able to rest properly.

She desperately searched for some way to remain behind in Fuyu’s room.

“What’re you waiting for? I told you to get out.”

Miyo could see Fuyu rolling her eyes in anger.

She needed to say something. Though she tried to think of a topic, Miyo didn’t possess any tactful or suitable material that would pique Fuyu’s interest.

She wasn’t great at talking to other people in the first place.

Miyo lacked knowledge in many areas, had a narrow vocabulary, struggled to keep up with conversation, and couldn't find the perfect words for a situation on the spot.

She hadn't always been that way. But she had gone a great many years without talking to others at all, so her conversational ability had withered.

Trying to get a sense of Fuyu's true feelings with my conversational skills was a foolish plan from the start.

If her words weren't enough, she needed another method. At this point, making her feelings clear through action was the only other option she had.

"Mother-in-law."

"…What now?"

Miyo was nearly discouraged by Fuyu's utter disgust that she still had more to say. But she managed to hold out somehow and fired herself up.

"You did say…you hadn't eaten breakfast yet, correct?"

"And what of it? No, don't you dare do anything unnecessary; you'll just cause me more trouble!"

"It is necessary. I'll go and bring you some breakfast."

This was it. Miyo could leave the room as she was told, while still being able to come back again.

Miyo gave herself a mental pat on the back for her brilliant scheme. She had simply blurted out the first idea that came to mind, but it seemed when her back was against the wall, things had a way of working out.

Unfortunately, Fuyu's response was far from ideal.

“Enough already. How much more will you torment me before you’re satisfied?!”

“Mother-in-law…”

Miyo cast her head down when Fuyu stopped her from leaving the room.

“And dispense with that ‘mother-in-law’ nonsense, too. That inability of yours to listen to what your betters have to say is but a sign of your poor and uncivilized upbringing, wouldn’t you say?”

Fuyu’s words stabbed right into Miyo’s heart.

She wanted to do her best to get on friendly terms with Fuyu, to have the woman accept her. It was just as pure and innocent a desire as wanting to study how to become a proper noblewoman. And yet…

Perhaps Miyo was imposing her wishes on Fuyu by trying to realize this dream, forcing the woman to bow to her whims.

Have I been acting pushy and uncivilized?

Doubt gradually took shape in her chest.

Was she doing things right? Was she a terrible person, purposely doing things Fuyu disliked?

But her time here was short. If she backed down now, she’d likely never have another chance to talk to Fuyu like this. And if that happened, this would no longer just be Miyo’s problem.

I’m sure Kiyoka would get involved, too…

Though her son would say otherwise, Fuyu was doing this for Kiyoka’s sake.

It was sad to imagine them quarreling with each other and never talking things out as a family despite the love Fuyu had for her son.

I’m sure this would work out if the two of them spoke their true feelings to each other.

The one thing she had wanted to avoid was Fuyu's dislike of her erasing any possibility of Kiyoka and Fuyu being able to face each other.

After all, Kiyoka hadn't been acting so stubborn when they decided on coming here. Surely he could have found other accommodations to avoid staying at the villa if he wanted. Maybe this was just Miyo's optimism speaking, but it was possible that Kiyoka himself had seen his chance to confront his mother as constructive and positive.

Yet Miyo's presence had ruined that opportunity.

I can't let myself ruin any more of his chances.

This wasn't the time to hesitate or falter. But a part of her was scared that Fuyu would hate her even more than she did already. She hesitated to take the first step.

"…I."

Was this really the time to back down? To be scared, trembling, and simply floating along with the status quo? Nothing would change if their relationship stayed like this.

A cold sweat ran down her forehead. She squeezed down tight on her trembling fingers.

"Um, I just, wanted to, um, talk more."

She expressed her honest feelings without realizing it.

"Excuse me?"

"I thought it'd be nice to chat freely with my mother-in-law, er, with you, Fuyu…even a little…"

If only she could act more gracefully. Miyo was fed up that she could make only clumsy, artless comments like this.

Now she'd basically revealed herself as the opposite of the clever woman Fuyu wanted her to be.

I'm such a fool…

The same thing had happened the day before. Miyo had worked hard to get Fuyu to realize just how serious she was. She had thought if Fuyu understood Miyo's resolve to be at Kiyoka's side, then she'd be willing to listen to what she had to say.

She wondered why it hadn't occurred to her.

It was obvious she'd just hate her even more. After all, it was Miyo's essential foundation—her lineage, her upbringing—that bothered Fuyu in particular, so learning more and more about Miyo would only make her hatred even stronger.

She sniffled. Her vision blurred.

"…What can I do? What will make you stop hating me?"

"I already told you. There's nothing for you to fix."

Sure enough, Fuyu's answer left her completely helpless. Miyo had thought herself in circles, but she was all out of responses; the only words she had left would lay her deepest feelings bare.

"I'll—I'll try harder. I'll spare no effort to become a noblewoman suitable for Kiyoka."

"Pretty words and nothing more. Simple effort doesn't always yield results, does it? Surely you're *very* familiar with that notion as someone born to a family with the Gift, pitiful as your family's abilities are, of course."

"That's… That's right."

Gifts were at the top of the list of things you couldn't obtain with hard work.

Without that innate quality, you would never achieve recognition or success. Even love was out of reach.

Miyo was all too familiar with that cruel, heartless world.

“We cannot change the past. Feelings alone are meaningless.”

“…I…”

Those weren’t just feelings for Miyo. But when she tried to answer, neither her throat nor her lips nor her tongue would budge, as though they were frozen in place.

Miyo was a thoroughly inexperienced failure. She’d studied and studied but was still far from being adequate. But even if her mouth had thawed that instant, Miyo couldn’t say that she would make Fuyu accept her in spite of her past.

That would make her sound like nothing but empty talk.

“No matter what you try to do, I have absolutely no plans to accept you. If you want my recognition so much, start with the family you were born into, your parents, and your upbringing. Go redo all of that and then come back.”

“…”

Fuyu’s words were both a cutting blade, rejecting and cutting up everything about Miyo, and a high, high wall, demonstrating the strength of her denial.

Nae followed after Miyo as she’d left Fuyu’s chamber in devastation.

“Young Mistress.”

“…It doesn’t seem like I’ll ever be the ‘young mistress’ at this rate.”

In reality, since Kiyoka’s will as the head of the family was absolute, she’d be able to gain the title of “young mistress.” But it would be a meaningless title to bear.

The tears she had held back the whole time came tumbling down her cheeks, one at a time. They surprised her.

Why am I crying?

She hadn't been hurt at all. She had heard so much worse on an almost daily basis back when she lived with her family. Where had this come from all of a sudden?

Kiyoka's exasperated voice came to mind.

"Please, learn to be more attuned to your pain. For me…"

Attuned. To pain.

Am I in pain? she asked herself, putting a hand on her chest.

Miyo thought she was used to abuse. But perhaps she had been in pain this whole time and simply hadn't realized it.

"Young Mistress…"

Nae's concerned voice brought Miyo back to her senses.

Not good. Right now, Miyo didn't have any time to stand around in a daze.

"Nae. Um, please give me some work do to, like yesterday."

"No, I could never."

"Please."

Miyo had fled from Fuyu. She couldn't find a way to resolve things. She wanted to do some work she could manage at the very least.

If even that wasn't possible, then it meant there was no longer anywhere in this villa where she belonged.

Nae showed the slightest hesitation before giving an empathetic frown.

"In that case, will you help out with the cleaning and laundry today?"

"Okay. I'll come as soon as I get changed."

Miyo returned to her room and put on the uniform from yesterday.

To pull herself together, she bound her hair up tighter than usual and tied up her kimono sleeves.

I'm not in any pain. Nothing about that exchange hurt me at all.

She managed to convince her heart of this. She had to, or she felt like she'd lose all her energy and sink down onto the floor.

Back when she'd lived with the Saimoris, she could move her body no matter how hurt she was, without shedding a single tear. Now, however, the world in front of her had gone black, and she was unable to take a single step forward.

Had she gotten weaker than she was before? That wasn't it.

I'm sure it's because I'm happy now.

She'd tasted happiness. She knew its warmth. That's why this was so much more painful than it had been in the past.

Desperate to lift her spirits, Miyo diligently got to work. She fully immersed herself in it, averting her attention away from the problem, from her wounds.

But the more she tried to forget, the heavier her chest grew, as if she had swallowed lead.

She spent the whole day working in silence until evening fell. When she greeted Kiyoka as he returned home, he immediately picked up on her despondence.

"Did Fuyu say something to you again?"

"…I'm okay."

"That's not an answer."

She didn't want to worry him. Still, she wasn't able to fully gloss over everything.

Miyo let out a long sigh.

"…Will you listen without getting upset?"

"This again?"

Miyo filled Kiyoka in about everything that had occurred during her conversation with Fuyu. Just as Miyo had asked, Kiyoka didn't interrupt her once, silently listening to everything until the end.

"Miyo. What can I do?"

At Kiyoka's words, Miyo looked up. He gazed down at her with peaceful eyes, devoid of anger.

He did this because his fiancée had asked him not to get mad, to let her do things her way.

"…Kiyoka."

She wanted to manage on her own. She had been so enthusiastic, only to end up like this. It was pathetic and embarrassing.

Maybe she'd just lean on Kiyoka. While it might not solve things, she wouldn't get hurt anymore. She'd be able to get through this ordeal painlessly. He would protect her.

Am I fine doing that? Will I regret it?

Miyo wasn't strong. Even now, she was fighting back the urge to run away. And no one would blame her for doing so.

She had cold feet. Outside of both being human, and being women, Fuyu and Miyo were so completely different that she couldn't help thinking that they might never understand each other.

Yet Miyo's head shook itself from side to side of its own volition, and her mouth selfishly answered for her.

"Don't do anything. Please."

"Are you sure?"

"I can still… I can still work harder."

After letting the words slip out of her mouth, she continued.

“But if it gets painful, difficult, and completely hopeless, then—”

“I’ll protect you. You can cry whenever you want. So keep trying to the bitter end, and make sure you don’t leave with any regrets.”

“…I will.”

She’d be fine as long as Kiyoka was with her. Unlike before, she wouldn’t end up losing heart again.

Just a little longer. She wanted to keep trying just a little longer.

The next chance to confront Fuyu came, for better or for worse, the following morning when they all gathered for breakfast.

It was the first time Fuyu had showed up for a meal since Miyo and Kiyoka had arrived at the villa.

“Why, hello, *ma chérie*. Feeling better now?”

Tadakiyo greeted her cheerfully, but Fuyu only shot him a look.

At her side sat Kiyoka, who didn’t seem rattled by a glance. Only Miyo had stiffened in anxiety.

“G-good morning, Mother-in-law.”

Miyo drummed up the courage to greet Fuyu. Silence descended over the table.

“Did I not tell you to quit calling me that? Grating on my ears first thing in the morning, I swear. Truly no class whatsoever.”

Miyo shrank back a little at the stern reply. Though she was ready to bolt on the spot, Miyo had feared Fuyu would ignore her outright, so she also felt slightly relieved.

This must’ve been showing on her face, for Fuyu knit her eyebrows in disgust.

“What are you grinning about? How sickening.”

“M-my apologies.”

Silence enveloped the table once again.

Part of Miyo wanted to try speaking to Fuyu again, but she couldn’t help thinking back to the day before and hesitating. The men, meanwhile, were dedicated to remaining silent observers.

The only sounds in the room were the quiet clatter of their breakfast being laid out in front of them.

“Well then, shall we?”

At Tadakiyo’s encouragement, each of them began their meal.

Their breakfast for the day consisted of fluffy bread rolls, an omelet, and fried bacon. Add to that the steamed vegetable salad and mushroom pottage, and it was yet another luxurious meal.

The villa chef served only Western-style dishes to suit Fuyu’s tastes.

That being said, Tadakiyo always had a separate dish to fit his poor constitution, so perhaps following Fuyu’s wishes may not have been the only real option.

While she brought the food up to her mouth, Miyo stole glances over at Fuyu.

She really is a very pretty woman.

It went without saying that her facial features were flawless, but her beauty extended to her formal behavior and refined mannerisms as well.

Personally, Miyo found Fuyu’s look to be a bit gaudy, but she was definitely someone Miyo could learn a thing or two about presentation from.

In truth, Miyo had been overjoyed to gain someone she could call “Mother-in-law” openly and without reservations.

So even if Fuyu ended up loathing Miyo to her core, she still found it hard to give up.

How can I start a conversation with her…?

At this rate, the mealtime would end without anything happening. If Miyo tried visiting her room, that would only put Fuyu into an even fouler mood, and there were no guarantees she would be present at the next meal.

If that happened, there was a possibility she would stay like that until Miyo and Kiyoka left.

“Mother-in-law.”

All she could hear was the loud drumming of her heart in her chest.

Simply addressing Fuyu made her uncontrollably nervous.

“You really can’t learn a thing, can you? How many times do I need to tell you not to call me that?”

Miyo was so nervous that Fuyu’s insults weren’t actually getting through to her.

The room was thick with tension. But she couldn’t let that get to her.

“U-um, would it be all right, if I came by your room again later?”

“Not at all.”

“Th-there’s a lot of things I’d like to learn from you. You’re a splendid noblewoman, and…um, I’d like to learn to be one, too, so—”

“Flattery will get you nowhere.”

Miyo wasn’t attempting to mock her with excessive praise, but that’s how Fuyu had taken it.

What did Miyo need to do for Fuyu to understand she was being genuine? There was a momentary pause in the conversation before Tadakiyo calmly interjected.

"Now, now. Why not go ahead and teach her a little?"

"I'll ask you to stay quiet, Tadakiyo. I don't want to hear orders like that from you."

Fuyu cleanly dashed his request, as if her weakness from yesterday had all been a lie.

When Miyo had talked to her yesterday, though…she recalled Fuyu mentioning she didn't want to upset her husband. Maybe she was misremembering things.

"All right, then. Sorry."

Tadakiyo slumped his shoulders in dejection.

"Staying here any longer looks like a waste of time. I'll be excusing myself, then."

Fuyu slowly put down her cutlery and stood up. Half of her breakfast was still left on her plate.

"W-wait, please…!"

Although Miyo half rose out of her seat to follow her, she hesitated, feeling guilty for leaving leftover food behind. As she did, Fuyu proceeded to exit the dining room.

But at that moment.

The dining room doors flew open as Sasaki entered in a panic.

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Now an entirely different tension filled the room.

After being hurt and driven to tears yesterday, Miyo looked proud, and also somewhat sad, as she stood up to Fuyu.

Kiyoka could only smile dryly at himself for becoming so sentimental just from listening on the side, but it appeared the time for leisurely listening was gone.

Red in the face, Sasaki rushed in and whispered something in Tadakiyo's ear, to which he calmly nodded in reply.

"What's the commotion?" Kiyoka asked.

Tadakiyo replied with rare solemnity.

"It appears the town is in an uproar. One of the villagers came rushing up here to ask for help."

"I'll leave at once."

Kiyoka stood up, and a grim-faced Tadakiyo did the same.

He had gone to the village to investigate the area, but just like before, he hadn't found anyone at the run-down shack. On top of that, he had yet to receive any orders from the central government.

His interrogation of the prisoner had hit a brick wall as well; there had been no developments at all yesterday.

Nevertheless, Kiyoka couldn't sit on his hands if there was a commotion in town.

He headed into the entry hall and asked Sasaki a question.

"Did you hear any specifics about what's going on?"

"No. It seems something happened early in the morning, though… Something about a fiend, I believe."

"A fiend?"

Yet again. An eyewitness report about an unidentified fiend. If that was the source of the uproar, then what exactly had happened differently this time?

“Kiyoka. Are you heading to the village?”

He nodded firmly in response to his father’s question.

“I’ll have to assess the situation.”

“I see.”

“There’s a chance that the villa will be in danger. If that happens—”

“I know. Just like we promised. You can leave defending this place to me.”

Though it was still pure speculation, he was going up against an unknown organization that had some manner of supernatural powers. There was no telling what they might try to do.

Since Kiyoka had come here as a military officer, he couldn’t prioritize his personal feelings.

Fortunately, there was no question he could depend on Tadakiyo. Kiyoka didn’t believe in his father as a person, but his abilities as a Gift-user were undeniable.

When they arrived at the entry hall, Kiyoka spied a villager on the sofa in the corner.

“Wait…”

They seemed familiar from behind; perhaps they were one of the village youths.

The villager seemed to sense their approach and whirled around in a panic.

“P-please help us…Mr. Soldier!”

Kiyoka had been right—it was the man that he had met a few days before, the first person to see the fiend.

“What happened?”

“The fiend, it showed up! It bit all my friends!”

“Wait. Just calm down and tell me what happened.”

The anxiety around the village rumors had reached a boiling point. Before the man or the store attendant woman could tell them to stop, a group of men got together and went to tear down the ruined shack just before dawn.

They had assumed they would manage with such a large group.

However, there was a large fiend waiting for them. The very same creature that the man had seen.

The fiend’s movements were swift, and it pierced the men’s bodies one after the other with its fangs. Despite the attack, however, the men bore no external wounds, and there was no outward change in their appearance, either.

They’d laughed it off as a childish magic trick. But they were dead wrong.

“As time went on, everyone started acting strange. Mumbling nonsense, acting violent…! The fiend must have devoured their souls!”

So terrified of the fiend was the man that he had fled the village after learning of this, despite the fact that nothing physical had happened to the group of men after they were bitten.

“But the fiend bit my legs when I was running away… It might be too late for me!”

“Calm down. They probably didn’t get their souls eaten. You should rest here a bit.”

Kiyoka thanked the man then added, “You worked hard.”

Despite how terrified he had looked the other day, though he was still trembling, he hadn’t fallen into a fearful panic. Kiyoka was certain this man truly cared about his village.

“I beg you! At this rate, the village will…”

The man furiously pleaded…until his movements came to a sudden halt.

“What’s wrong?”

“A-aauggh… Hngaaaaah!”

The groaning man’s eyes rolled back, and he gripped his head. Something was clearly wrong with him.

Kiyoka gasped quietly.

Is this what happens when a fiend devours you?

No, someone who’d had their soul eaten wouldn’t end up like this. Kiyoka got the feeling that there was something fundamentally different going on here compared to the other supernatural phenomena he had seen before.

“Fuyu. This area’s dangerous. Get back to your room.”

She showed no sign of being convinced by her husband’s words of warning.

“And *what* exactly is going on here, Tadakiyo?! I demand an explanation!”

Her stern gaze was glued on the man from the village as he writhed in pain.

Kiyoka gritted his teeth at the inconvenient development.

A dyed-in-the-wool noblewoman, Fuyu would never consent to letting a peasant inside her mansion. Even when now was absolutely not the time to cater to her stubborn pride.

Kiyoka needed to go to the village as soon as possible, but would it really be all right to leave things as they were? As he wavered on what course of action to take, Miyo quietly approached him.

“Kiyoka, um, what’s going on?”

“The villagers have been attacked by a fiend. I’m heading there at once… Miyo.”

“Yes?”

His fiancée looked back up at him, her eyes showing not the slightest bit of hesitation. She nodded as if she had already seen through everything Kiyoka was thinking.

“I can look after things here. You should get down there as soon as you can.”

Just where had his fiancée who had been so anxious about his mother flown off to? He couldn’t believe how dependable the woman in front of him was.

Kiyoka lowered his eyes for a moment.

Miyo had been growing by the day. Enough not to need Kiyoka’s protection anymore. One day she’d spread out her big wings and fly off into a world of freedom.

If that happens, I bet I’ll…

His father had been right. Love was blooming in Kiyoka’s heart, and soon, the feeling would be too enormous for him to cover up.

But now wasn’t the time for him to figure out an answer.

He looked straight into Miyo’s clear eyes.

“Thanks… Miyo, don’t do anything dangerous, no matter what. Leave the fighting up to Father.”

“I know. I won’t push myself too hard. That goes for you, too, Kiyoka. Be careful.”

“I will,” he replied, bringing his forehead up against Miyo’s.

“K-Kiyoka?”

He was going to fully resolve the situation and hurry back to her as fast as he could. Before he could forget this feeling of her warmth on his skin.

“I’ll be back.”

Kiyoka quickly turned around and hurried off toward the village without looking back.

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She watched her fiancé as he departed.

There wasn’t much Miyo could do for him. In fact, there was practically nothing. Simply being away from Kiyoka’s side made her uneasy. But it was her duty to see him off like this.

She closed the door behind her and rushed over to the villager.

“Hold on, Miyo. It’s dangerous to get too close,” Tadakiyo said, already kneeling down beside the man to check his condition.

The man seemed to be almost fully unconscious. He lay limp on his side, letting out an occasional groan.

“I can’t do anything from afar,” Miyo replied, resolutely kneeling down by the man to look at his face.

Miyo wasn’t a doctor, so she didn’t know what was wrong with him, or where he was hurt. Nevertheless, she knew they couldn’t just leave him like this.

“Let’s get him somewhere else for now… Nae, can you lay him down in the empty guest room on the first floor?”

“I shall make the arrangements.”

“Thank you.”

When she asked this of Nae, who was waiting in the wings, the housemaid promptly began issuing instructions to the other servants.

Next, Miyo turned back to Tadakiyo.

“Are you okay with me using the guest room, Father-in-law?”

“Of course.”

Readily nodding his head, Tadakiyo then offered to carry the man to the guest room himself.

But there was one person who didn’t agree with that idea.

“Stop this instant!”

Fuyu’s shrill voice echoed through the entry hall, and everyone who had begun hurriedly getting to work turned their attention to her.

“I absolutely will not let an unknown peasant into our villa!”

“Mother-in-law.”

“What if a contagious disease caused him to collapse? Everyone in this mansion would be wiped out.”

“Well…”

She did make a valid point.

Both Miyo and Tadakiyo had no idea why the man had fainted. If they took him in too hastily, they might increase the number of victims.

However, it wasn't the time to be quarreling over something like this.

Miyo rose to her feet and stood face-to-face with Fuyu.

"That's a reasonable concern, Mother-in-law. But we can't simply leave him like this forever, either."

"You! Why are you even giving all the orders anyway?! You don't have any sway here. Stop acting like you can do whatever you want!"

Scrunching her brows, Fuyu shrieked. Her emotions were just as intensely riled up as they had been two days before.

But Miyo wasn't going to back down.

"I know. I don't have any authority myself. But I made a promise to Kiyoka. A promise that I'd look after things here."

Exposing the house to danger. To Miyo, it wasn't a problem if she was wrong or right—because it was a wife's job to handle anything she was entrusted with.

Looking up at Fuyu's eyes, located just slightly above hers, Miyo talked back to her.

Yesterday, she'd simply recoiled without saying a word, but now she was desperate.

"If you want to look after him so much, then you can go and do it elsewhere! *I'm* the mistress of this house!"

"And I'm Kiyoka's fiancée!"

"Ngh!"

"Supporting him, so he can face his work without any lingering worries in the back of his mind… That's my job, something I can do to help him. And I want to do it right."

Kiyoka was a Gift-user. He was one of the country's weapons. He had to fight when ordered, no matter how dangerous the battle.

And Miyo would do absolutely anything and everything she could to support him.

This was what she'd decided. She would yield to no one.

"Fuyu, I'm the head of the house, and I've given her my permission. Can you leave it at that for me?" Tadakiyo asked.

"Why?! I haven't said anything wrong!"

She was right. Fuyu's duty was protecting the Kudou family villa and the people in it. There was nothing wrong with anything she said. Refusing to accept this villager who was virtually unknown to them was the obvious way to handle the situation.

Miyo relaxed her face and smiled at Fuyu.

"Yes. That's why I'll do everything. Please stay safe in your room, Mother-in-law."

Fuyu's eyes widened at her words.

"What…?! Are you saying you're going to quarantine yourself with him?"

"If that is what you ask, Mother-in-law."

"D-don't be ridiculous! You're a woman. Sick or not, I would never let you be alone together with a man!"

"Huh?"

Now it was Miyo's turn to be surprised.

What did Fuyu mean by that? Miyo might have been misunderstanding, but…

"…Mother-in-law, are you concerned for my safety?"

When Miyo asked this in slight bewilderment, Fuyu's cheeks instantly flushed with blood.

"A-as if that would ever be the case! I simply thought it absurd that you'd be the type of loose woman to be alone with another man besides your fiancé!"

"Oh…"

Just as Fuyu had said, Miyo's words were lacking a noblewoman's modesty.

She was mortified she had mistaken Fuyu's declaration for being worried about her.

"Well, now you know."

Looking on at Miyo's dejection, Fuyu gave a haughty snort.

The man completely lost consciousness shortly after they brought him to the guest room.

"This looks bad. His breathing's shallow, and his heartbeat's weak," Tadakiyo diagnosed, with the small amount of medical knowledge he possessed, after getting a general look over the man's condition.

All Miyo could do was wipe the sweat off the man's forehead as he continued to intermittently stir in agony. But Tadakiyo had told her that was plenty.

"Without knowing the cause, there's no way to try and treat him. Since you're watching over him, we'll know the instant there's any change for the worse. That's plenty helpful."

"But still…"

At this rate, his life would be in danger.

Kiyoka was surely searching for the cause of it all at the moment, but there was no telling how much longer it would take. There were no guarantees the villager would hold out until then.

Just as Tadakiyo had said, the man's breathing rapidly weakened while they attended to him, as if it could stop at any moment.

Worried, Miyo couldn't take her eyes off him, prompting Tadakiyo to lightly tap her on the shoulder.

"Fretting over it won't help him."

"…You're right."

As she replied, a certain idea flashed in the back of her mind for a moment.

A way to save this man's life. Since he was out cold, she could slip inside him with her Gift and work from within to make him regain consciousness.

Miyo was currently in the middle of learning about her Gift, and how to use it, from Hazuki and her cousin Arata.

Normal Gift-users were naturally confronted with their supernatural abilities from a young age and could wield them as freely as they could breathe, but it was not so with Miyo. She was still in the middle of her training and needed to be fully aware of her Gift to use it. She was quite an inexperienced Gift-user.

The Usuba special Gift, which interfaced with the minds of others, was very dangerous. One mistake with their manipulation, and it could easily destroy the mind of the person they were using it on.

Arata had explicitly instructed her not to use her Gift at her own discretion. He said it had been pure luck that she'd saved Kiyoka from his endless slumber.

It had been reckless of her to do that.

"Still, the fact he was bitten by a fiend does leave a lot of questions…," Tadakiyo murmured while stroking his chin. Just then, he looked around gravely.

“Someone’s here.”

“Huh?”

Miyo cocked her head, wondering what he meant. Tadakiyo let out a sigh and smiled feebly.

“We have…a guest of some kind, it seems, so I’ll go out and greet them.”

Who in the world could they have as a guest at a time like this? And how could Tadakiyo tell from here in the guest room?

Those words were halfway out of Miyo’s mouth, but she gave up asking them. There was something strange about Tadakiyo’s reaction.

“Miyo, once Kiyoka comes back, and everything’s all settled, let’s all enjoy a tasty meal together before you two head back to the capital.”

“Huh? Okay.”

He patted Miyo on the shoulder one more time before heading out of the room.

“Tadakiyo, just where are you going?”

Miyo could hear Fuyu’s voice from where she was standing directly outside the door for some unknown reason.

“Something’s come up. Fuyu, if you’re that worried, why don’t you just come in?”

“Wh—I’m not worried in the slightest.”

Tadakiyo simply smiled as he departed. At this, Fuyu went past him, wearing a begrudging look as she entered the room.

“Are you *actually* looking after him at all?”

“I am.”

Miyo replied without taking her eyes off the man in the bed.

She wasn't going to run. This was an emergency. It wasn't time for her to be arguing with Fuyu or getting depressed.

"You're really doing all that just to attract Kiyoka's eye?"

There was an ever-so-subtle degree of doubt present in Fuyu's voice, one that Miyo had never heard from her before.

"I…"

When asked, she couldn't deny that she wanted to. She always wanted him to praise her, and she wanted him to acknowledge her from the bottom of his heart as someone worthy to be by his side.

Yet it was true that there was more to it than that.

"I want to prove useful to Kiyoka. I don't want to take advantage of my position as his fiancée. I'll do whatever I can, one thing at a time, so that eventually, I'll be able to hold my head up high proudly at Kiyoka's side."

"…"

"That's why, if there is anything I can do…"

Miyo gently took the unconscious man's hand. When she put the tips of her fingers on his wrist, she felt that his pulse had gotten even weaker. His breathing was also shallower than it had been moments earlier, the intervals between each breath growing longer.

Even a layperson could clearly see that the man's life was fading away as the minutes passed.

He didn't have much time left.

"…Even if it meant putting your life on the line?"

"Yes. I'd risk my life. If it was for Kiyoka's sake."

Miyo answered unfalteringly.

She was sure Kiyoka was throwing himself into danger at that very moment to protect the village and the people who lived there. And she believed that he would be able to do it.

But what if this man were to die here? Those villagers would likely turn their anger on Kiyoka, even if he'd managed to protect everything else.

She couldn't sit here watching and doing nothing.

"…Mother-in-law."

"What?"

"I'm going to save this man."

She'd made up her mind. It would mean breaking her promise to Arata, but she couldn't sit there idly when there was something she could do to save him.

Fuyu glared at Miyo, as if she found the comment completely incomprehensible.

"A totally powerless woman like you is going to save him? And how is that, exactly?"

"There is…a way. I can use my Gift."

She finally turned around to face Fuyu, who wore a frown that seemed to say she thought Miyo was talking nonsense and playing her for a fool.

"I thought you didn't have a Gift?"

"I didn't, up until recently. But despite that…I'm a member of the Usuba family. If I enter into this man's consciousness, I might be able to make him regain his."

"Usuba… What do you mean, enter his—"

“Father-in-law said as much, too. His condition will stabilize a bit more if we can get him to come to. My power can accomplish that.”

Now all Miyo needed to do was succeed. She was, of course, abundantly aware of her inexperience. She couldn’t simply shrug it off and tell herself she just needed to avoid failure.

When she considered what would happen if this went poorly, an unpleasant sweat beaded down her brow.

This plan would truly put her life on the line.

“What little you’ve told me makes it sound quite dangerous.”

“It is… To be honest, I think it’s reckless. I’ve only just awoken to my Gift, so it’s not reliable.”

Fuyu opened up the fan in her hand to conceal her worried, incredulous expression.

“You said as much yourself, Mother-in-law. Feelings alone are meaningless.”

“I did.”

“I think so, too. So please, let me show you my resolve with my actions.”

Fuyu frowned and furrowed her brow.

“Why, I never said anything about risking your life on a dangerous gamble, did I?”

It was such a quintessentially Fuyu way of expressing things. Miyo felt a smile well up inside her. Almost enough to forget about the foolhardy thing she was about to do.

She understood enough to know that Fuyu wasn’t telling her to brave danger to prove herself. That wasn’t even a factor at play.

I’m doing this all of my own volition.

She might not be able to achieve anything, but Miyo didn't want to stand there stock-still without taking any step forward.

"I know. That's why you don't need to feel responsible, Mother-in-law."

"…That's not what I was trying to say."

Fuyu's quiet whisper dissipated before it could reach Miyo's ears.

Miyo turned back to the bed again. With trembling fingers, she lightly grabbed the man's wrist. Then she closed her eyes.

There was a chance she would never open her eyelids again. That's what would happen if she failed. She wouldn't be able to see Kiyoka again. She wouldn't be able to return to their home together.

It was frightening.

But for now, she desperately sealed her fear away deep in her chest.

Any unrest or hesitation can inhibit my Gift… I need to calm down.

She remembered what she had been taught.

"Are you ready? When you use your Gift, you need to be calm. If not, the effect won't be stable, and in the worst-case scenario, you might fail to activate it."

"The more powerful a Gift, the more terrible the result when you activate it incorrectly. You need to be prepared for there to be casualties when you use it, yourself included."

"I'll be blunt: the fact you were able to use your Gift without issue that one time was a fluke. Don't get cocky about your abilities. Please don't use it by yourself."

Her cousin's words echoed in the back of her mind, as if to reprimand Miyo for breaking his orders.

But she had been preparing up until that point to use her Gift when it really mattered like this. It was inconceivable for her to avoid using it exactly when it was most needed.

It would be fine. Everything would go smoothly.

Miyo focused on her breathing. She sank deeper and deeper, diving into a pitch-black world, one where she couldn't tell left from right or up from down.

After journeying through that pure darkness for a little while, she could see a faint and thin line, the boundary separating one consciousness from another.

Once she stepped over this line, beyond it was not herself, but the inner mind of another person.

She tensed her light and substanceless form. Gulping hard, Miyo took one step forward and—

Huh?

Suddenly, her body rapidly floated upward, returning from the world of the subconscious to the world of the living. The boundary that she had been so close to crossing was steadily fading into the distance.

Of her five senses, her hearing was the first to return. She picked up a familiar voice.

"Miyo, stop!"

"…What?"

When all of her senses had returned, she felt the heft of her physical body weighing her down. Cold sweat lay thick on her skin.

A man was clutching Miyo in his arms. The handsome face in front of her eyes was unmistakably that of her cousin, Arata Usuba.

He was furious. This was the first time she'd seen anger on his face instead of gentle smile.

In a haze, Miyo's mind drifted to an inconsequential question.

"Why are you here, Arata?"

"That doesn't matter right now. I'm mad at you. I told you over and over again not to use your power at your own discretion."

When she tried sitting up, she was assailed with severe vertigo.

Miyo could only tilt her head in confusion, tormented with head pain.

Fuyu glanced at Arata, just as perplexed as Miyo about his arrival.

On the other side of the cracked-open door stood Nae and all the other servants, looking confused about what they were supposed to do.

"Miyo, are you listening to me?"

"Um, y-es."

For the time being, she decided to nod. When she did, Arata responded with an exasperated sigh.

"In any event, I'm glad I made it in time… Honestly, is *this* why Prince Takaihito sent me?"

"Huh?"

"I came here under Prince Takaihito's orders. Not that I really understand why myself."

Kneeling on the floor to match Miyo, Arata then took her hand and pulled her up.

His wavy chestnut hair was uncharacteristically disheveled, and his suit looked slightly rumpled. He appeared to have been in a rush getting there.

Miyo managed to brace her teetering legs on the floor to avoid falling over.

"…And just who do you think you are? Barging into another person's home like this."

Miyo heard Fuyu's firm voice come from behind Arata. When she shifted her gaze, she saw Fuyu standing there, her wariness clear as day.

Arata flashed his usual amicable smile without paying the slightest attention to Fuyu, who was glaring at him as if she were ready to shoot the suspicious intruder on the spot, and he replied in a truly dignified manner.

"It's a pleasure to meet you. My name is Arata Usuba. Thank you for looking after my cousin Miyo."

"Usuba…?!"

"Yes."

Immediately after Arata's firm nod, the color visibly drained from Fuyu's face.

"Why?"

Ever since the Usubas had become a familiar presence in her life, Miyo would forget that their name normally inspired fear. Dread and eeriness were the only things to associate with Gift-users who controlled and manipulated other people's minds.

While it didn't seem to sink in with her when Miyo brought the name up, Fuyu was unable to hide her discomposure while face-to-face with the impressive future head of the Usuba family.

"Well, as I said, I did not choose to be here. I've simply been dispatched here by Prince Takaihito… However, that is still no justification for thoughtlessly intruding into your home. Please accept my apologies."

After hearing his exceedingly smooth and commendable apology, even Fuyu had her malice instantly drained out of her.

Eyes that had once considered him an intruder quickly turned into those of dumbfounded amazement.

“What… W-well, in the case—”

“Really? Oh, thank goodness, I’m glad you’ve forgiven me.”

“Huh?”

“Is something the matter?”

Fuyu hadn’t said a single word about forgiving Arata. However, she seemed unable to assert herself against the pressure of his smile and the way he’d forced her to accept his apology.

Even Fuyu was instantly won over. Miyo would expect nothing less from a negotiator working at a trading firm.

While Fuyu secretly admired his craft, Arata turned his gaze back at Miyo.

“So then. Do you have an excuse for using your Gift without permission?”

“…I don’t, I’m sorry.”

Though she didn’t regret what she had done, she wasn’t confident she could convince Arata of that if she explained.

Seeing Miyo slump her shoulders and stare in silence at her fingernails, Arata relaxed with a sigh.

“We can save the lecture for later. Our priority should be addressing the situation at hand,” he said, turning his attention toward the man lying down on the bed.

“You want to save him, don’t you, Miyo?”

“I do.”

Arata smiled with reluctant resignation.

Now that Miyo thought about it, the guest Tadakiyo mentioned earlier must have been Arata. If that was the case, though, Tadakiyo was slow to return.

While these questions floated in her mind, Miyo instead focused on the conversation with Arata.

“I wouldn’t be able to sleep at night if this man were to die here, either. I’ll assist you, Miyo, so prepare to use your power.”

“O-okay!”

She never thought he’d let her use her Gift, so she nodded furiously with surprise.

“You’re still going to keep this up?”

At Fuyu’s quiet grumble, Miyo turned to face her.

“I am.”

“Why?”

“…Mother-in-law.”

Fuyu misunderstood something about her. Miyo couldn’t guess exactly what it was, but there was a chance her words wouldn’t sincerely reach the woman.

Her hesitation lasted less than a second.

“Up until a little while ago, I had given up on everything.”

There was the slightest hint of desolation mixed in the sound of her voice.

She’d had nothing. Everything had been out of her reach. She’d even wished for a swift end for that terrible life of hers.

Without any hopes or dreams, she found peace of mind only when thinking about death. She'd wished to sink to hell rather than continue living. She'd yearned for her light to be snuffed out.

But.

"But Kiyoka gave me his heart. He filled me with warmth when I was totally empty inside…"

It was Kiyoka who'd watered her dried-out heart and filled it to the brim back then, when she'd lacked even the strength to pick up her broken, scattered pieces.

In a way, her entire being was composed of things she had received from Kiyoka. Giving up would mean throwing away the treasures Kiyoka had presented her with.

"Though I might be undesirable, though I might have an unimpressive background…I don't want to lose sight of what I have now and what I can do now. I don't want to give up."

"Do you realize what sort of state you're in right now?"

Using her still unfamiliar Gift had caused abnormalities in her body.

Intense vertigo and head pain. Miyo couldn't summon much strength in her body, and her footing was unsteady. She felt a bit nauseous, too, and her cold sweat was unending.

To be honest, it was taking all she had to keep standing.

She was sure her complexion must've been similarly pale, enough to make even Fuyu worry about her.

"I…know."

Miyo forced a smile as she spoke, prompting Fuyu to sink into silence.

"Miyo, what exactly happened to this man, and what sort of state is he in?"

“Oh, yes… This is all just what I was told, but…”

The village nearby had been attacked by a fiend, which had bitten the man in the process.

She tried explaining everything, but with only a passing knowledge of the circumstances, Miyo wasn’t able to provide any answers to Arata’s detailed questions.

However, Fuyu also didn’t have a full grasp of the situation, and neither Tadakiyo nor Kiyoka was there. All they could do was manage with the fragmented information they had.

“None of that really helps us here, does it?”

“…I’m sorry.”

Miyo was ashamed of her own inadequacy.

If only she had asked Kiyoka to tell her more. If only she’d had a better command of her Gift, if she’d been a reliable Gift-user… Miyo couldn’t stop these thoughts from running through her head.

Arata flashed a gentle smile and stoutly propped up Miyo’s shoulders.

“There’s nothing to apologize for. Keeping things secret is part of his job, and I understand Commander Kudou’s desire to keep you from being involved in any unnecessary danger.”

“I know.”

“That being said,” Arata continued after seeing Miyo nod.

“I agree that this man doesn’t bear the telltale signs of a fiend attack. Having your soul taken would turn the body into an empty husk. If anything, this looks like—”

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After exiting the mansion, Kiyoka immediately ran toward the deserted shack.

As he passed through the village on the way, it looked to indeed be in chaos. Men were unconscious, just like the one back in the villa. The relatives standing around them all looked anxious.

This really isn't good.

Kiyoka surmised that their symptoms were slightly different from those of a fiend bite.

It was likely that they had been possessed, not had their souls devoured. But this wasn't complete possession. If that had been the case, the fiend would have completely taken over all of its victims' bodies by now.

If I had to describe it, it's like the fiend forced a portion of itself inside them…

Grotesqueries were also living things. Kiyoka had no choice but to remove those that harmed humans, but their lives weren't to be indiscriminately tinkered with. Nevertheless.

The Gifted Communion, or whatever they're called, have done just that.

They'd minutely divided up parts of the fiend's soul or taken its blood and flesh, then imbedded them in people to induce a partially possessed state.

The men had lost consciousness because their bodies were rejecting that foreign presence.

Kiyoka speculated this based on his examination of the man he'd captured.

He could sense the presence of a fiend inside the captive's body.

But why would they do this?

While he was thinking things over, he had managed to get pretty close to the ruined shack.

“I’d ask you not to come any closer.”

All of a sudden, he heard a low voice come from out in front. Crunching over the fallen leaves as they came into view was yet another figure in a black cloak.

Kiyoka, of course, knew someone was here, so he wasn’t surprised. He arched his brow slightly.

“I see, so you’re the one leading the Gifted Communion here?”

“Well now… What would make you say that?”

Kiyoka’s guess had been correct.

While quietly preparing himself for combat, he answered the question.

“You’re different from the man I captured before. You’re a true Gift-user.”

Judging from the figure’s physique and voice, he was male. He was also surrounded with the unique signs of the Gift, familiar to Kiyoka.

He wasn’t some kind of imitation Gift-user, like the man Kiyoka had captured.

“You’re quite sharp. I’d expect nothing less of Kiyoka Kudou, commander of the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit.”

“You know everything about me, then?”

Kiyoka had expected as much. It was only natural given how much he had been snooping around the outskirts of the villa.

The cloaked man held out one of his hands. Suddenly, the ground started to thicken with mud. This was his supernatural power.

“I’d like to make a deal with you, Commander, if possible.”

“No thanks.”

Kiyoka needed to capture this man and make him spill everything he knew about the Gifted Communion and the incident at hand.

The moment the man quietly murmured, “That’s a pity,” the muddy ground gained even more moisture. The earth was transforming into a swamp.

Manipulating the ground…no, he’s manipulating water.

At this rate, Kiyoka’s feet would get stuck. He instantly used telekinetic power to manipulate the earth. Kiyoka’s Gift was far and away the more powerful of the two; he had always been in control of the situation.

With a short exhale of breath, the stretch of muddy earth crackled loudly as it froze over.

“Manipulating fire, making thunder strike at will… and you can even freeze water, too? *Hah-hah*, looks like there’s no way for me to win. You aren’t the head of the Kudou family for nothing.”

“If you belong to a family with a Gift, you should know what it means to try laying a hand on us.”

Though Kiyoka’s declaration could be seen as arrogant, he was simply telling the truth.

The Kudou family’s position above other Gift-users came from their strength. There wasn’t anyone capable of threatening the head of the family, and if you made them into an enemy, your defeat was guaranteed.

The only ones with any chance against them were the Gift-users of the Usuba family, which was precisely why the Saimoris had previously tried to get their hands on Miyo for her Usuba lineage. The Kudous were simply that dominant.

“I’m very aware of that, of course. But this is the will of the Founder.”

“Founder?”

He must have been referring to the person who’d started the Gifted Communion. That meant this man in front of him was also just a single member of the larger group, working under the directions of someone else.

His expression still hidden beneath his hood, the man spread both of his arms out wide.

“The Gift is a wonderful power. Yet now it runs the risk of being exterminated by ‘science’ and other drivel. Even someone like you, Commander, who stands high above all Gift-users, must be anxious about the present situation, yes?”

“…That’s fair. I figured it wouldn’t be too unreasonable to see some Gift-users with your line of thinking start to pop up.”

The Gift was an outstanding ability. It was even fair to say that Gift-users were practically a more-advanced form of human being.

But no matter how far their powers took them, Gift-users could never transcend their human frames, their physical bodies. Even if one haughtily insisted that they were superior to others because they had supernatural powers, they could never hope to be anything more than human as long as they had the body of one.

If Gift-users were slowly beginning to fade away, that, too, may have been the laws of nature at work.

“The Founder is trying to create a whole new world. One where every human is given the chance to receive supernatural abilities.”

Kiyoka thought it preposterous.

Was that truly a world of equality? No, even that society would simply give rise to some new form of injustice. It was tenuous logic.

“That’s why we are taking out first step toward our ideal world here in this village. Everything is just as the Founder envisaged.”

“By getting innocent people involved?”

“…When trying to effect major change, a few sacrifices are unavoidable. It must’ve been much the same during the Restoration.”

True or not, Kiyoka couldn’t sanction that type of thinking.

At this point, it was evident the Gifted Communion was using the village and the villagers to try and get closer to this “ideal world” nonsense. This “Founder” had turned the community into a test site.

“Kiyoka Kudou. If you fear for the future of Gift-users, you should join our order. Accept the teachings of our Founder, Naoshi Usui.”

It was a name Kiyoka had never heard before. In all likelihood, he was a Gift-user, but he had no memory of that particular family.

He made a mental note of the name to ensure he didn’t forget.

Then Kiyoka brought a forceful end to the unpleasant conversation at hand.

“Bringing harm to the Empire while in possession of a Gift is a grave transgression. Are you prepared to face justice?”

“Hmph. You are incompatible with our vision, just as the Founder said. However, you’ve been informed of his teachings… I have safely carried out my role. Time to make my retreat.”

The Gift-user man lightly brought his hand up, and an indescribably uncomfortable presence began to close in.

A sound like a rumbling earthquake echoed with its every step. Letting out an ear-piercing war cry and closing in on Kiyoka was an enormous figure wrapped in a cloak—a fiend.

No, that wasn’t it.

This is just a person that a fiend has fully possessed.

This was the truth behind the fiend sightings.

Two thick milky white horns grew out from their forehead, and their fangs flickered in and out of view inside their mouth. Their body was so large it was easy to believe otherwise, but they were unmistakably human. Nevertheless, their eyes were totally unfocused, and Kiyoka could tell that they were no longer in their right mind.

The fiend fragments that were possessing the men of the village must have come from this original fiend. The Gifted Communion had forcibly implanted them with its power.

"This is what our research taught us," said the cloaked Gift-user. "That there is a use for Grotesqueries. Whether it's their power, their souls, or their bodies…if you take any part of them and force it into a person, you can awaken them to their Gift! Now, go! Let all fools who refuse to understand our teachings know their place!"

The fiend loosed a bestial roar, an unpleasant sound of gnashing teeth that made Kiyoka want to cover his ears.

The colossal figure, under the complete possession of the fiend, charged toward Kiyoka with frightening speed, mowing down the surrounding trees as it went. It seemed to have lost all trace of its former human reasoning.

Kiyoka nimbly dodged the fiend's massive body as it closed in and used his telekinesis to freeze it in place. Yet the power of his opponent was so tremendous that it threatened to break free of Kiyoka's Gift with its brute strength.

I guess I can't expect things to go as easily as they did against another Gift-user.

He increased the power behind his Gift. Then he lifted the giant figure into midair and threw it violently into a nearby tree.

The tree broke with a dull crack, and after falling down onto the ground, the fiend's body stopped moving.

That man… Must've run away.

It appeared he had set the fiend-possessed man on Kiyoka while he quickly made his getaway.

Kiyoka let out a sigh and approached the enormous figure to stick an evil-sealing paper charm on it.

This would seal the fiend's power away for the time being. It wouldn't take long for the men possessed by pieces of the fiend's body to come back to their senses.

Kiyoka stood up to return to the villa.

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Meanwhile, on the side of the road that stretched from the village to the Kudou villa, Tadakiyo stood face-to-face with several cloaked figures.

"Sheesh…"

He had gone outside to check after sensing someone approaching the mansion and been met with a gaggle of uninvited guests.

Although he had complied with his son's request to protect the villa, this was his first time on the battlefield in a while, so he couldn't help feeling anxious about his body no longer being up to the task.

There were three figures facing him, each clad in an abnormal aura.

"I take it you're those imitation Gift-users Kiyoka mentioned, then?"

Artificially produced Gift-users. Such research wasn't completely absent from the annals of Gift-user history.

But Gifts were far too powerful for the average human body to handle. Tadakiyo was painfully aware of this; after all, he had dealt with his body failing him from the moment he was born because of his Gift.

"Gift-users have always been nothing more than normal humans who gained powers from heaven."

Trying to manipulate that power at will was a gross display of conceit.

People deliberately generating Gift-users. No matter how confident they were that they could succeed, their efforts would always end in failure.

"Now then, what exactly are you all after? Trying to free your comrade? Or attacking our home…?"

Not a single one of them answered Tadakiyo's question.

Time ticked away as both parties impatiently stared each other down.

The first to break the deadlock was the cloaked group of three. They simultaneously raised their hands up in the air, and a small tornado manifested, sucking in more dirt and leaves, along with their Gift-summoned fire, to quickly grow into a maelstrom.

Tadakiyo's eyes lit up at the sight.

"Incredible. A well-executed trick. But you're stupid if you think that will be enough to take care of me."

For the first time in a long time, he was tasting the euphoria of the battlefield. It bubbled up inside him as a huge grin stretched across his face.

How truly naïve of them to think they'd be able to strike down the Kudous just by getting their hands on a Gift. That was never going to happen.

The maelstrom the three imitation Gift-users had summoned headed for Tadakiyo.

At this rate, he wasn't going to survive a direct hit from the vortex. The dirt and tree branches would tear his skin open, the flames would burn him up, and the sharp swirling winds would slice his body to pieces.

Fully cognizant of all this, Tadakiyo blocked the vortex head on.

Yeah. It's not so bad getting a chance to fight every once in a while.

He'd relinquished the head of the family position to Kiyoka almost immediately after his son had graduated from university. Tadakiyo had spent the rest of his days here living a life of retirement. At the time, his body had been at its limits, so there were no other options available, but it had felt quite disappointing to retreat from the front lines.

Without even lifting a finger, he made the whirlwind disappear in an instant.

"This child's play is never going to be enough to deal with me. Go polish those skills of yours, then try again."

Speaking as gently as possible, Tadakiyo then activated his Gift.

He sent subtly crackling electricity along the ground, which caught the three cloaked figures. Helpless against the electrocution, they collapsed on the spot and went totally motionless.

"Would've liked to face off against someone that could put up a bit more of a fight."

He was dejected—these three had barely served as a warm-up.

If this was who he was up against, Tadakiyo thought, perhaps he should've handled them all before Kiyoka even came out here on his mission.

"Ah well. It is what it is."

Muttering to himself, he examined the three adherents of the Gifted Communion.

When he took off their cloaks, he found that two of the three were women. One looked right around twenty years old, while the other was in her forties. The remaining man looked young, around twenty himself.

"None of them have any physical traits in common. Nothing really stands out about their age spread, either… If this group features a wide range of people, that's going to be quite the problem."

When he looked closer, a small vial with a trace amount of bright red liquid came falling out of the forty-year-old adherent's breast pocket.

There was no mistaking it—fiend's blood.

Tadakiyo reflexively winced at the vial.

"It may not be right for me to say this, given all the Grotesqueries I've wiped out in my day, but…they're up to some real nasty stuff."

Toying with life not for their own survival but to satisfy a lust for supernatural power. That wasn't a particularly pleasant thing to think about.

But it was a windfall that the attackers had left him with some evidence.

Hopefully, the events in the village could lead to the whole Gifted Communion being rounded up and arrested. If that wasn't the case, they were going to prove to be a troublesome group.

Tadakiyo put the vial away in his breast pocket and pondered over things…but gave up midthought.

This doesn't have anything to do with me anymore.

He had retired. Tadakiyo could leave everything up to Kiyoka.

While he may have been his son, he still genuinely felt Kiyoka had grown into a splendid man. His body wasn't weak like Tadakiyo's, and he was a powerful Gift-user.

His only worry had been that no matter how much time passed, he refused to get married, but that, too, would be resolved before long.

"I'm one lucky father…*koff*. "

Wheezing slightly, Tadakiyo got to work tying up the three followers.

⚜ *CHAPTER 6* ⚜

Once Spring Has Come

Miyo stood in the entryway, nervously on edge.

A lot of time had passed since Kiyoka had rushed out that morning. Though his investigation had taken him to the outskirts of town, far too much time had elapsed since then, so she was anxious.

“Kiyoka…”

“You don’t need to worry so much. Commander Kudou will be fine,” Arata said with a strained smile next to her, but his words did nothing to ease Miyo’s mind.

Moments before, Tadakiyo had come back from going to greet a guest. However, not only had he returned dragging strange people in black cloaks behind him, he’d also revealed that there was a similar captive being held in the basement, causing an uproar inside the mansion.

Miyo knew about the mysterious occurrences taking place in the village, but having heard absolutely nothing about the involvement of enigmatic religious orders and Gift-users, she could make neither heads nor tails of the situation.

“I know that his missions can be dangerous… But fighting against other Gift-users…”

“Come now, Miyo. This is Commander Kudou we’re talking about. If anything, he’d probably have a much easier time dealing with Gift-users than Grotesqueries. Besides, you were on a much more dangerous tightrope yourself.”

“…You’re right.”

Miyo frowned with guilt.

She'd used her Gift to save the man from the village. With the fruits from her training, along with Arata's assistance, she had been able to make the man regain consciousness at the expense of her own physical condition, but it had been unquestionably dangerous, where one wrong move could've led to death.

Her sickly reaction had been only temporary. Now that she was back to normal, she would've liked to avoid telling Kiyoka about this, but she knew she couldn't keep it from him, either.

"Good work, Miyo."

Finished with locking up the captives in the basement, Tadakiyo called out to greet her.

"Welcome back, Father-in-law."

"Thanks… Oh, you're the scion of the Tsuruki Trading firm, yes? The Usubas' heir, Arata Usuba, is it?"

Arata responded to Tadakiyo's questioning with a respectful bow.

"It's a pleasure to meet you. I am Arata Usuba."

"Oh, fine for you to come out as an Usuba, is it?"

"Indeed. Prince Takaihito intends on gradually having us come out into the open."

"Really. That's good."

The conversation broke off abruptly. While listening, Miyo expected Kiyoka to return at any moment, keeping her eyes pointed in the direction of the village, when suddenly, a small gasp escaped from her lips.

"Kiyoka…!"

From far off, she could make out Kiyoka taking long strides down the leaf-covered road. He didn't look injured at all, but he was dragging something large in his hands.

"Huh?"

"What's that, I wonder?"

Arata cocked his head beside Miyo, also watching Kiyoka from afar.

Before she knew it, Miyo broke into a dash.

"Kiyoka!"

When she called out to her fiancé, walking with his head to the ground, Kiyoka abruptly looked up to see her.

"Miyo."

"Welcome home, Kiyoka. I'm so glad you're all right…"

Forgetting herself, she ran up to him and dove into his chest. With her whole body, she reminded herself of her fiancé's warmth and his beating heart.

He enveloped Miyo in his strong arms.

"I'm back. Sorry for worrying you."

At his comment, the terror she'd suppressed welled up to the surface. Her eyes moistened with relief.

Miyo had put up a brave face, but she'd actually been deathly afraid the whole time. Scared of using her unfamiliar Gift on a stranger and scared that Kiyoka was throwing himself into a dangerous battle.

Knowing that, with one small slipup, she might've lost everything.

"A-as long as you're—you're safe, Kiyoka, th-that's…"

She wanted to say "that's all I can ask for," but the words got caught in her throat.

Still, her kind fiancé understood everything.

“I wasn’t in any danger. Don’t cry.”

Kiyoka lightly patted his hands on Miyo’s back, but the next second, he growled in a low—no, a downright subterranean—tone.

“And? What’re you doing here, Arata Usuba?”

With a composed smile, Arata followed up behind Miyo.

“*Ah-hah-hah*, it’s your fault, you know. Prince Takaihito gave me direct orders to come out here.”

“Prince Takaihito…? I see.”

“That aside, what is that thing you have with you? Bagged yourself quite a large quarry, haven’t you? Did you do some hunting on the way?”

Finally coming back to reality, Miyo slowly shifted her gaze downward and realized what Kiyoka was dragging with him. She immediately jumped backward.

“Wh-what, um, is that a person…?”

It was a giant man, also wrapped in a black cloak. He was so huge that Kiyoka looked like a child next to him. Her fiancé had apparently pulled the man the whole way here without stopping to catch his breath.

“You could say it was a hunt. That’s what I was called here to do, after all.”

He casually tossed the colossal figure he was dragging behind him, and it landed on the ground with a dull thud.

The giant man’s forehead was marked with vestigial bumps where his horns had once grown, and fang-like teeth poked out from the corners of his mouth.

But above all else, he was huge. His thick, meaty hands were so big, it looked like they could crush Miyo's head with a squeeze. She shuddered when she thought what could have happened to Kiyoka while fighting such a massive opponent.

"It looks like fiend possession, then."

"The evil spirit's been sealed away. What happened to that villager?"

Miyo exchanged a look with Arata and reluctantly confessed the truth.

"Um…I used my Gift to wake him up."

"What?"

Kiyoka's eyes sharpened.

His reaction was so terrifying, Miyo almost squealed with fright. Nevertheless, she managed to stumble through the rest of her explanation.

"I-if he stayed unconscious, he might've died, so, um…well…"

"…You used your Gift to get him back in stable condition."

"Th-that's right."

She managed a nod, and then right at that moment—she felt him wrap her up in a strong, almost painful embrace.

"I'm sorry. This is all because I left you to deal with the situation yourself… Please don't do anything risky like that again, I'm begging you."

His voice sounded weak. Miyo's chest tightened.

She didn't regret her actions, but she did feel she'd acted foolishly after seeing how much they'd worried Kiyoka.

"I'm sorry."

“No, it’s fine. You did a great job. Thank you.”

Miyo managed to slightly nod her head up and down in Kiyoka’s arms.

As they continued their awkward exchange, they suddenly heard loud, boneheaded complaints come their way.

“Aaaaall right now, you three! Just how long do you plan on staying out here? I’ll catch a cold!”

Kiyoka reluctantly separated himself and released Miyo… Strangely, her whole body felt hot enough to start sweating despite the chill in the air.

I’m so embarrassed.

She had done it again for everyone to see.

“How lovely to see a couple of youngsters not letting the cold air stop them from getting warmed up. *Achoo! Koff !* Whew, it’s cooold out here.”

Tadakiyo sneezed and coughed as he laughed.

Miyo suspected he was making a suggestive remark.

Kiyoka’s irritation at his father came through plain as day.

“Go scurry back inside if you’re so damn cold. That’s what you get for standing out here and gawking at other people.”

“*Hah-hah-hah.* Commander, you can’t expect us to head back without getting a nice long glimpse at such an amusing display.”

“Not you, too.”

As a playful atmosphere descended over them, the four returned inside the villa.

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It was late into the evening. Out on the tile-covered balcony attached to Kiyoka's room on the Kudou villa's second floor, two figures leaned against the baluster, illuminated in the moonlight.

Kiyoka, who had confronted the Communion's followers that morning before dealing with the ensuing aftermath, and Arata, who had mainly focused on helping calm down the chaos among the people in the village.

They had been so busy dealing with one thing after another that evening had fallen by the time they got everything under control.

From there, they both decided to share a drink. They each held a cup filled with local sake in their hands.

Despite winter being right around the corner, the evening was curiously warm. And though Kiyoka and Arata normally got along like oil and water, their exchange was pleasant and peaceful thanks to their exhaustion and the modest amount of alcohol.

"I see. So that explains your urgent report."

Kiyoka went over all the details of the incident once more with Arata beside him.

Everything started with the Gifted Communion. They'd turned this region into their testing grounds, made the villagers undergo experiments, and forcefully possessed people with Grotesqueries to awaken their Gifts.

The Gift-user man from before had claimed it was his job to relay the teachings of the Founder to Kiyoka. This was nothing more than speculation on Kiyoka's part, but he suspected the Gifted Communion had chosen this region in particular in an attempt to harm his family.

But if that was the case, it raised an entirely different question as to why the Founder wanted to convey his objectives to Kiyoka.

In the end, the string of unnatural phenomena and the eyewitness accounts of suspicious individuals all led back to them.

An investigator from the capital would arrive tomorrow, and more details would come to light as they dug further.

“Yeah… What’s going on in the capital?”

Arata answered Kiyoka’s question about what was happening there.

“The Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit has been roped into hunting down the Gifted Communion, too. The government isn’t stupid, so we’ve already identified some of their potential hideouts.”

This recent event had driven the government’s back against the wall. If things continued like this, the Gifted Communion would eventually become a threat to the whole Empire.

The group’s claims, that they could bestow a power surpassing all human knowledge to anyone, regardless of lineage or circumstances, would definitely attract a large number of people.

“I met with Godou before coming here. Your unit seems to be under the impression that the top brass will have them serve as a counterforce against the Gifted Communion. They could use you back there soon, Commander.”

“You’re right.”

As long as Godou was in charge, Kiyoka knew nothing strange would happen, but his unit could lose morale if he was away for any longer.

Even without Arata’s encouragement, he planned on returning the next day. He had already said as much to his father, and Miyo as well.

Suddenly remembering something, Kiyoka took an object from his breast pocket and tossed it to Arata. Safely catching the item, Arata frowned.

“What is this?”

“A piece of physical evidence my father confiscated.”

A vial filled with fiend blood. Better described as the medium that the Gifted Communion used for bestowing artificial Gifts in their experiments.

“They want to bring about a world of equality… By using nonsense like this.”

Arata’s expression transformed into bitter disgust.

“This ‘Founder’ person must be a Gift-user. Otherwise, they wouldn’t have such a deep understanding of Gifts.”

Gift research, quite obviously, required a well-versed understanding of those abilities themselves. Information about them was essentially a state secret. It wasn’t something the average person would casually get their hands on.

That meant the Founder had to be a Gift-user themselves, or a member of a family who possessed one.

“That would make sense. Do you have any idea who they could be?”

“Not at all. I’ll need to research more when I get back, but… Currently, there are unlikely to be any Gift-users whose whereabouts are unknown. Including those who have gone overseas.”

All Gift-users had a bare minimum amount of their actions supervised by the government. By now, the state would have looked into the movements of every known Gift-user.

Despite this, Kiyoka still hadn't received any word about the Founder's true identity. If that was the case…

Kiyoka quietly mumbled out a name.

"…Naoshi Usui."

"What?"

"That's the Founder's name, apparently. Though it could be fake."

Arata let out a gasp that rang in Kiyoka's ears.

His reaction seemed a little strange. When he glanced over beside him, Kiyoka frowned.

"What's wrong?"

Even under the ephemeral light of the moon, Kiyoka was able to see just how much color had drained from Arata's face. The hand he'd placed over his mouth, as if to hold back nausea, seemed to tremble slightly, while he stood there dumbfounded, unblinking in shock.

Arata's calm and collected composure had entirely disappeared.

"Are you sure?"

"Huh?"

"Is that really what he said? That his name…was Naoshi…Naoshi Usui…?"

Inwardly puzzled, Kiyoka nodded.

"Yeah, I definitely remember hearing that name. What about it?"

Arata placed the sake cup in his quivering hands down at his feet and took a deep breath to try calming himself.

Clearly the name rang a bell with him. However, Kiyoka didn't have an urge to immediately demand an explanation from Arata since he looked so uncharacteristically upset.

“It can’t be—Ah, but that would explain it. That’s why Prince Takaihito…”

Arata mumbled as he panted with short breaths.

“Fill me in on what’s going on.”

“…Yes, I should. Oh, perfect timing.”

Feebly turning his sights on the glass door behind him, Kiyoka saw his gaze land on Miyo, timidly checking in on the pair.

“Um, I’m sorry. For interrupting.”

“We don’t mind.”

Kiyoka had also realized Miyo had come into the room. Though his attention was so captured by Arata’s unusual change, he’d accidentally let her call from the other side of the door go unanswered.

“This topic concerns Miyo as well. I’d like her to hear this, too.”

When he put it like that, all Kiyoka could do was nod his head.

A smile across his pallid face, Arata beckoned Miyo over and sat her down in one of the balcony chairs. She looked up at them quizzically.

“Um. Arata, you look unwell… Maybe you should sit down.”

“Don’t worry about me. How much do you know about this recent incident?”

“Oh, um, not too much, really. But this, um, Gifted Communion? Kiyoka told me about them.”

Kiyoka didn’t know how dangerous the case would end up being, so he’d only given Miyo a partial account.

But since Gift-users were pulling the strings, there was a chance that leaving her in the dark could be even more dangerous. Of

course, he still didn't have the slightest intention of getting her involved any further.

"I see. You always think things through, Commander."

Arata offered Kiyoka clumsy, uncharacteristic praise.

He stared off into the distance, with a look of vague resignation.

"If what you said is true, Commander… Then all of the blame for everything involving the Gifted Communion lies with the Usuba family."

"What do you mean?"

"The person who called themselves the Founder of the Gifted Communion is named Naoshi Usui…and the Usuis are one of the Usuba branch families."

Hearing that made things click for Kiyoka.

The Usubas had been shrouded in mystery until very recently. If the Usuis were one of their branch families, they'd naturally be outside Kiyoka's area of knowledge.

"The Usuis themselves, however, are no threat. It's Naoshi Usui himself who is the issue."

"You know his background?"

"Of course."

I wish I didn't, Arata's remorseful expression seemed to say.

"As you surmised, Naoshi Usui is a Gift-user. One of the now few who possess the Usuba family's Gift."

Breaking off for a moment, he turned to give Miyo a smile.

"He was Miyo's mother's—Sumi Saimori's—prospective marriage partner."

Both Kiyoka and Miyo stared at him in shock.

The circumstances surrounding the Usubas before Miyo was born came to Kiyoka's mind.

Arata's words reminded him that Sumi Usuba had indeed been set to marry another Gift-user inside their family. Whether she herself wished for as much or not, he could not say. At the very least, that was what the head of the Usuba family, Yoshirou Usuba, wanted to do.

There was nothing unusual about Sumi already having a marriage candidate for when she came of age.

Kiyoka could feel the buzz from the alcohol immediately drain away.

"I don't know too much about this since it happened long before I was born, but Naoshi Usui apparently had feelings for Miyo's mother beyond their marriage arrangement. He broke away from the family and left for parts unknown right after she was married off to the Saimoris."

"Broke away?"

"Yes. According to the Usuba family laws, those who are disloyal to the family are met with severe punishment. However, at the time…"

"I get it. At the time, the Usubas didn't have much power left to do anything. Though actually, I'm sure this Naoshi Usui's brilliance must have played a part in his escape."

"You're right on both counts. He was pursued but never found. Some members of the family continue to search for him to this very day, but they haven't obtained any pertinent information as to his whereabouts."

Kiyoka saw flickers of deep resignation come and go from Arata's face. He clearly understood the anxiety afflicting him.

The question was, Why had Usui made his move now, of all times?

The Usubas would continue to slowly change from here on out. Instead of being isolated from society, they were going to be able to live openly and with dignity, like Kiyoka and other Gift-users. That was the future that should've been waiting for them.

But now that this had happened… If the fact that a person related to the Usubas was aiming to overthrow the government went public, the survival of the entire family would be thrust into jeopardy.

"Does Naoshi Usui hate the Usubas?"

Arata languidly shook his head at Kiyoka's question. His tone of voice sounded apathetic to anyone who heard it.

"I don't have the slightest idea about what he's thinking. He could absolutely hate us, envy us, and desire revenge, but there's just as much a chance that he doesn't at all. Though he must have some feelings on the subject, or he wouldn't be doing all of this, would he?"

Kiyoka didn't have any words to offer to the despondent Arata.

But if there was one part of this conversation that concerned him, it was that their opponent had the Usubas' powers—a Gift that could control the minds of others, a Gift that could defeat any other Gift-user. And on top of that, this ability was in the hands of a talented wielder.

Kiyoka thought back to his battle against Arata. It had been night and day compared to fighting the average Gift-user.

To be honest, Naoshi Usui was the greatest threat Kiyoka could imagine.

"Forgive me for my unbecoming attitude."

"Arata."

Miyo said his name with a concerned look.

Kiyoka then recalled Arata mentioning that he'd come on Takaihito's orders. He was sure that otherworldly imperial prince saw a future where Arata and Kiyoka both learned of Naoshi Usui.

Smiling, though with his eyebrows scrunched into a frown, Arata picked up his sake and said…

"I'll be heading back first. Please enjoy yourselves, you two… Though be sure not to get too cold, now."

…before slowly leaving the balcony behind.

He looked so much smaller than usual as he departed.

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Miyo looked up at the night sky, unsure about what she should do.

The Usuba family. Her mother. She hadn't forgotten about them, but there was some part of her that thought it was all in the past.

If she considered herself part of the Usuba family, then maybe she should've said something to console Arata. Yet she also sensed there wasn't anything that she *could* say, especially since she was still an outsider.

"Miyo, are you cold?"

"No, I'm okay… Thank you."

The night was warm, and she was wearing a *haori* overcoat over her kimono, so she was plenty comfortable.

Physically, she was fine, but mentally, Miyo had seen better days. This must have shown on her face, for Kiyoka pulled in the other chair on the balcony and sat down beside her.

"…It's been a real ordeal, huh."

An ordeal. She thought that was the perfect way to describe it.

It felt like it was one problem after another. But Miyo didn't have the power to do anything about it. Her position itself was still up in the air.

"Is there anything that I can do?"

The Usubas considered Miyo one of their own. They looked after Miyo, who had never known normal parents or siblings, Yoshirou treating her like a granddaughter and Arata treating her like a younger sister.

She wanted to do something to help them, but with her hands already full, Miyo had almost nothing to give.

"I don't really think Arata told you all of that because he wanted you to do something about it."

"But."

Kiyoka gently patted Miyo's head with his wide palm.

"If I were him, I'd just want you to be safe and stay out of trouble. At least that's how I would feel."

What an unfair answer.

Miyo wanted everyone *else* to be safe just as much as she wanted to be comfortable herself. That was why she wanted to help, half-baked and grandiose though her wish may have been.

"The Usubas will be fine. I'll do everything I can to help them, too."

Kiyoka stopped to consider his next words for a moment. Then he continued carefully.

"…I get that you're feeling impatient."

"Hmph!"

“I also understand that you’re working hard to compensate for that. But the fact is, you won’t be able to get what you’re after overnight.”

“…I know.”

Irritation smoldered in her breast. Embarrassed he’d picked up on these feelings so clearly, she placed a hand to her chest.

“Miyo. Anything you can’t do, I’ll handle. I’ll work in your stead and bear your load. Can you agree to that?”

“Kiyoka…”

“Anything that you want to do, I’ll leave in your hands. For the things out of your grasp, I’ll make up for it. That’s how I want to live together with you. Instead of trying to handle things on our own, if we help each other out, compensate for one another, we’ll be able to manage anything that comes our way. Side by side, as husband and wife.”

At first blush, Kiyoka’s words seemed to be simple consolation. But if that was the case, then how could Miyo explain the passion she saw deep in Kiyoka’s eyes as he gazed at her?

Side by side, as husband and wife…

Why did Kiyoka always know exactly what Miyo wanted?

There was a part of me somewhere that felt the need to become a Gift-user and noblewoman worthy of Kiyoka for us to stay together…

She had been impatient to close the gap between them so they could continue forward together, side by side. In other words, she may have tried handling everything on her own.

Miyo herself couldn’t believe how hard she’d strived day in and day out.

“Am I…am I giving you the support you need?”

Hesitant, and unable to ask without wavering slightly, Kiyoka faintly smiled back at Miyo.

"Yes, of course. You became indispensable to me a long time ago. That's why…"

Slowly, her fiancé's beautiful face, like an artistic masterpiece, drew in close.

Wha—

She didn't have enough time to process what was happening. The tips of both their noses were close to touching. When Miyo reflexively slammed her eyes shut, she felt something warm and soft brush up against her lips for a brief moment.

Opening her eyes in utter amazement, she was greeted with Kiyoka's gentle smile, and a faint pink flush on his porcelain cheeks.

"So when spring comes…will you be my wife?"

"I-I will."

"Thank you."

I'll remember this smile in front of me for as long as I live.

As her mind short-circuited, that one thought prevailed.

Miyo had never been more reluctant to leave her room than this morning.

She had woken up just before dawn like usual then agonized endlessly in bed until the sun began to rise.

M-my lips…!

She thought back to the scene over and over again, and each time she did, blood threatened to rush to her head.

She had absolutely no memory of how she'd managed to get back to her own room after that.

The one thing she knew for sure was that she was glad they weren't both sharing the same bed, as had been originally arranged. If by some chance they had slept in the same bed, she was sure her heart wouldn't have lasted through the night.

B-but, well, a kiss on the lips, for a betrothed couple…

That was something everyone did… Or so she thought.

Miyo didn't have any friends her age, so she had no way of knowing for sure. Maybe she would try asking Hazuki about it when she got back. But since merely recalling the situation made her face hot enough to catch fire, she couldn't fathom how she'd be able to verbally explain everything that had happened.

How in the world am I supposed to face Kiyoka when I see him today?

Miyo buried her face in the pure white pillow as an embarrassed groan unconsciously escaped her lips.

She was agonizing over every minor detail of the encounter, wondering what had compelled Kiyoka to kiss her on the lips in the first place. Besides the fact they were engaged, of course.

Miyo was a mature young woman herself. She understood that placing your lips on someone else's was what two people did when they shared feelings for each other. Or even going one step further, it was something lovers did to confirm their feelings for each other. Particularly unmarried men and women.

Am I Kiyoka's lover…? No.

That wasn't it. She was nothing more than a partner he'd been arranged to marry.

Though really, marrying for love was extremely rare. Many people had arranged marriages, and they either developed feelings for each other or went their separate ways. Love was something that

sprouted when two people interacted with each other as an engaged, and eventually married, couple.

If you asked Miyo whether she thought she and Kiyoka had the type of relationship that fostered love, her answer would be no.

When she thought about it like that, her head cooled down slightly.

Then why did Kiyoka…?

She couldn't imagine if he'd done that on impulse. Kiyoka of all people wouldn't act so irresponsibly.

He must've had a compelling reason to do it.

That's right, Kiyoka asked me to become his wife. He must have been teaching me what it means to be married.

Despite coming up with this explanation herself, she couldn't help feeling she was off the mark. But she couldn't think of any alternatives.

It was embarrassing to get carried away like this. She was truly glad Kiyoka wasn't there to see her with her head in the clouds.

Miyo heaved a sigh. Slipping out from under the covers, she felt a bit downcast as she got changed and left her room.

Miyo washed her face and headed to the laundry room.

When she went to help out with the laundry as she always did, the housemaids vehemently objected. They had completely taken to treating Miyo as the young mistress of the house. After she pleaded, however, they ultimately allowed her to assist them.

As she kept herself busy handling this and that, the sun rose into full view. It was time for breakfast.

"Oh, Arata. Good morning."

While heading for the dining room, Miyo encountered Arata, who had stayed at the villa as a guest for the night.

“Good morning, Miyo… I apologize for my unusual behavior last night.”

Though he wore an expression of slight concern, Arata was carrying himself as he normally did.

“No, please… Um, but, if there is anything that I can do—”

“You don’t need to worry about me.”

Smiling as he shook his head from side to side, Miyo gulped back the rest of what she was going to say.

“Please save that concern for yourself instead. Like I said yesterday, there’s a chance Naoshi Usui held special feelings for your mother. As you are Sumi Usuba’s daughter, there’s a chance he might try doing something to you as well.”

Arata then added, “Of course, I’ll do my best to protect you,” trying to play it off as a joke.

Miyo then remembered they had once talked about Arata becoming her bodyguard. Kiyoka had ultimately compromised by inviting Arata to serve as Miyo’s Gift instructor, rather than her bodyguard.

But since he spent many hours teaching Miyo, Arata had ended up as her bodyguard in a roundabout way, too.

According to Arata, Kiyoka was very smart with his money, so this must have all gone according to plan.

“…Okay. I’ll be careful.”

“Please do.”

Arata flashed Miyo his typical smile, but after witnessing how he’d acted last night, she couldn’t help reading him as somewhat distressed. However, Miyo wavered on voicing that observation aloud.

Picking up on Miyo's uncertainty, Arata smiled dryly.

"In truth, I'd like you to stay home, and I'm sure Commander Kudou feels that way too, so—"

"I'd appreciate not hearing you casually put words in my mouth."

Miyo suddenly heard a low voice come from behind her, and her heart skipped a beat.

"Oh, good morning, Commander Kudou… You say that I'm putting words in your mouth, but did I say anything untrue?"

"Miyo's my wife. As long as I'm protecting her, there won't be a problem."

"Wife? Getting a bit ahead of yourself, aren't we, Commander? Has the date for your wedding been set, then?"

"This coming spring. I'll have this mess cleaned up by then."

Miyo was caught between the two men sending sparks flying at each other. Her heart throbbed, and her mind went blank. She couldn't turn to face Kiyoka.

Finding this suspicious, he circled around in front of her.

"Miyo, what's wrong?"

There was no need to ask. Kiyoka knew full well why she was acting this way.

But seeing his handsome face peering at her from such a close distance instantly made her blush from head to toe; she was in no position to protest.

"K-Kiyoka… G-g-g-ood morning."

"Right, good morning. Your face is beet red."

"N-n-no it's nyo—"

She completely tripped over her own words as she tried to say “not.”

This was so embarrassing that she wanted to drop dead right then and there. If there was a hole nearby, she wanted to crawl into it.

Arata grinned and relished watching Miyo visibly shaken to her core.

“Commander, what did you do to Miyo after I left last night? She’s clearly not her normal self.”

“Nothing.”

Kiyoka bluntly replied.

Hiding her flushed cheeks with both hands, Miyo allowed herself to calm down.

As they were talking, Tadakiyo and Fuyu both entered the dining room and cut their conversation short. Miyo wouldn’t have been able to handle any more prodding questions from Arata, so she inwardly heaved a sigh of relief.

She couldn’t understand how Kiyoka could stay so composed in the first place.

Maybe it’s because he was drinking last night… Did he forget everything because he was drunk?

No, no, no, that was definitely out of the question.

Kiyoka had an absurd tolerance for alcohol and wasn’t the type to lose his memory like that. That was inconceivable.

As she sat down, she stole a glance at the man next to her.

It feels a bit like last night was all just a dream.

Seeing him behaving so normal and unperturbed made her start to think so. Meanwhile…

Feeling mysterious glances from Fuyu while she ate, Miyo finished her breakfast in silence then headed back to her room.

“Miyo.”

“Y-yes?!”

She stopped in her tracks and turned around. When she did, Miyo jumped back in surprise at Kiyoka being closer than she’d expected.

“Eep!”

He pulled her back, throwing her mind into a state of utter chaos. Then Kiyoka went even further, drawing his face close to her ear and whispering to her. Focusing on his breath caressing her eye, she felt her head spinning.

“Miyo. Please don’t forget about yesterday… That was how I feel.”

“Wha…what? Huh?”

How he feels? That’s what that was? What did he mean by that?

Not only was her mind in complete disarray, but Miyo, who had absolutely no romantic experience to speak of, cocked her head in confusion since she had absolutely no idea what he meant. It seemed Kiyoka was well aware of this himself, too.

“You don’t need to panic. I know you’ll understand someday.”

He smoothly separated his body from hers.

Dumbfounded, Miyo watched him depart from the dining room.

Okay, that should be all my luggage.

It was nearly time for them to depart the villa.

When she checked to make sure she wasn’t forgetting anything, she thought back over all the events that had happened during their stay.

Ultimately, things ended up staying unresolved between Fuyu and me…

Since she'd been unable to improve Fuyu's hostile—though she wanted to believe it wasn't that severe—attitude, Miyo's desire to get along with her mother-in-law had come to naught.

It pained her to think that all she'd managed to do was disrupt Kiyoka and Fuyu's relationship.

Perhaps it would've been better if she hadn't pushed the point, after all.

Her thoughts darkening, she gazed at the change of clothes she had laid out on top of the bed.

I brought it because I thought this was a good occasion to wear it, but…I feel like a fool getting so carried away with myself. And it might just upset Fuyu again, too.

She lightly touched the lovely light purple one-piece dress Hazuki and Miyo had gone out to buy before coming here.

Wanting to show it off to Kiyoka, she had managed to take it out of her bag to wear on the train home, but now she couldn't summon up the courage to put it on.

As she lost herself in her thoughts, going back and forth about what she should do, there came a sudden knock on the door.

"Yes?"

"It's Nae. May I come in?"

"Yes, please, enter."

After Miyo's reply, Nae quietly opened the door and entered the room.

"Young Mistress, I've come to help you prepare for you departure… But it seems you don't need much help."

Of course. Miyo usually did everything herself, but she probably should have left this up to the servants.

“M-my apologies.”

“There’s nothing to apologize for. In fact, that was just a pretext, if you will…”

“Huh?”

Pretext? For what?

The handmaiden was being evasive, as though she was having difficulty broaching the topic. As she cocked her head, a reproachful and shrill “Excuse me!” assaulted Miyo’s ears.

“Nae, I told you not to say that!”

Appearing from behind the door, her brow furrowed, was Fuyu, done up in yet another gorgeous dress.

“Mother-in-law…?”

“Haven’t I told you to stop calling me that? Must everyone be so insolent with me? Why, no one will listen to any of my orders. It’s awful.”

Fuyu vented her dissatisfaction with an exceptionally cross look on her face.

Since they had barely seen each other outside of meals since the incident the day before, Miyo wondered if she had pent up her dissatisfaction with Miyo in the meantime. And now she had come to let it all out at her?

Fuyu approached Miyo and glared at her as if she were a mosquito, which prompted Miyo to brace herself.

“So you’re returning to the capital? Oh, I’m truly relieved to hear that.”

Just as Miyo had expected, spiteful remarks flew out of Fuyu's well-shaped lips.

"I am… Um, I sincerely apologize. For everything."

"Indeed. You gave me quite the headache. Enough that I never want you to come here again."

"Mistress."

"Nae. Backstabbers should keep quiet. Honestly, do you believe I don't know that all of you have taken this girl's side?"

Fuyu sharply cut off Nae's attempt to reprimand her mistress.

It was true that all the servants at the villa had started treating Miyo like the young mistress of the house. It was right to call it a betrayal, given Fuyu's refusal to accept Miyo.

With an indignant snort, Fuyu turned her attention to the one-piece dress spread out on top of the bed.

"Is this yours, then?"

Miyo nodded while her trepidation whirled inside her.

"Y-yes. That's right…"

"Really? Well, it doesn't look cheap, at least."

She had bought it with Hazuki at the department store. While she had Hazuki's guarantee it was a quality item, Miyo had lost confidence that she could do it justice.

"And what is that irritating look for? It's so ugly, I can scarcely believe it. Kiyoka may be my son, but even horrible taste has its limits."

"My apologies."

Miyo averted her gaze and apologized.

She hadn't been able to do anything, to change anything. She felt like she no longer had any right to stand up to Fuyu.

All she could do right now was avoid making Fuyu's already bad impression of her even worse.

Just like when she'd lived with the Saimoris, the only thing Miyo was good for was apologizing. That realization stung more than the fiercest insult. She felt like she was going to cry.

She lowered her eyes so Fuyu wouldn't see them slowly blurring with tears.

"Hmph, serves you right… Well, that's what I'd like to say, but I'm sure Tadakiyo will get angry at me and claim I'm bullying you. Don't start bawling on me."

"M-my apologies."

The more she hastily tried to hold them back, the more they overflowed.

I know I can't let myself cry, but…

Nonstop apologies and breaking into tears. Had anything really changed from her time at her parents' house?

Just like her unchanged relationship with Fuyu, could it be that even what she thought had changed about herself had actually not changed at all?

The past couldn't be altered. Fuyu was absolutely right. Since her past had made her who she was today, maybe it was impossible for Miyo to transform herself as well.

It was a feeling of total despair, as if her feet were sinking in bottomless mire.

"That apologizing of yours is quite obnoxious."

"…!"

“What do you think apologizing like that will do, I wonder? The more you say sorry, the weaker it sounds. Worthless groveling is simply annoying.”

“I, um…”

Fuyu had told her not to apologize.

Miyo hadn’t forgotten being told the same thing earlier. That her apology would sound less sincere. She was repeating the same mistakes yet again.

She was such a hopeless fool.

“I don’t have any sympathy for your past. I can’t stand those annoying apologies of yours, and I don’t plan on accepting someone so rude, and so fit to be a servant, as you.”

Fuyu’s tone was clear and decisive.

Miyo suspected Fuyu’s words stemmed from something inside her—a firm conviction. She had a strength that Miyo lacked.

She should have been franker and more open with Fuyu. It was only because she was so spineless that she had been unable to do so.

“But.”

As she sank deeper into despair and desperately focused her energy into keeping her tears at bay, Miyo heard an unexpected word from Fuyu, who continued making her point.

“You’ve been adamantly fulfilling your duty as Kiyoka’s fiancée, I would say.”

“Huh…?”

Right when Miyo raised her head up in shock, Fuyu loudly snapped her fan open to cover her mouth before turning to look off into the distance.

“Make no mistake, now. You’re ugly, impolite, mangy, gloomy, and uncultured. Not to mention scrawny, and lacking the slightest bit of dignity, pride, or even self-respect. You can’t meet the barest minimum of what it takes to be considered human.”

Fuyu’s string of insults, rattled off in a single breath, left Miyo little time to react. It was just one horrible stab in her heart after another.

“But you didn’t even debate or boast to me about actually possessing supernatural abilities, did you?”

Her quiet voice disappeared before it could reach Miyo’s ears.

Fuyu continued in a shrill high-pitched voice, as if snapping back to her senses.

“But that spirit you have of trying to act on Kiyoka’s behalf, and that *alone*, I suppose I can admit that *maybe* it *might* be worthy of him. *Just barely*, mind you!”

Miyo’s eyes bulged open wide, and she could only manage a flat “Okay” in reply.

Fuyu’s words were so complicated and confusing that she stood blankly, her brain unable to comprehend the essential point behind what she had said…

Fuyu’s cheeks flushed crimson at Miyo’s dull response.

“Enough already! Hold out your hand!”

“Y-yes, ma’am.”

Miyo thrust out both hands, unsure exactly what was going on, and something very light was placed softly in her palm.

It was a charming white lace ribbon.

Miyo’s confusion only grew.

“I wore this when I was a young girl. In other words, it’s cheap, outdated garbage that I’ll never wear again. An absolutely perfect match for you, if I do say so myself!”

“Um, you’re giving this…to me?”

“Absolutely not, of course! It’s garbage, garbage! You love doing servant work, don’t you? Then go throw it away!”

“Yes, but…”

The ribbon was very old, and it seemed to have been attentively cared for. That, and it had such intricately woven lace. It definitely wasn’t cheap.

And since Fuyu had kept this ribbon in impeccable condition over the years, she couldn’t really have thought it was garbage, either.

“Enough!” she said, yet again raising her voice and scowling with a huff at the bewildered Miyo.

“It’s trash! Nothing more. If you absolutely insist on keeping that piece of garbage for yourself, then feel free to abscond with it all you like, but know it should be thrown in the rubbish where it belongs!”

Punctuating her words with another huff, Fuyu kept up her ferocious glare as she departed the room.

The tears welling up in her eyes and the despair that had taken over her heart disappeared completely as Miyo stood there speechless, watching Fuyu leave.

It felt as if a storm had passed through.

“What should I…?”

The ribbon in her hands was garbage, according to Fuyu, but it seemed like anything but to Miyo. She couldn’t imagine throwing it away.

It was Nae, still in the room with her, who answered Miyo's question.

"I'm terribly sorry, Young Mistress. I believe it would be best to simply accept that ribbon for yourself."

"You think so?"

"I do. This is nothing but my personal speculation, but I believe the mistress intended that as a present for you."

From what Miyo had seen during her few days there, it seemed like Nae understood Fuyu the most of all the servants. While Fuyu would never explicitly state as much, Miyo knew that she put a lot of trust in Nae.

If the handmaid was saying that Miyo should keep the ribbon, there was little chance she was wrong, but…

"Are you sure…?"

Miyo was completely at a loss as to whether the word *gift* had ever shown up in anything Fuyu had just told her.

"The mistress appears to have some fondness for you, Young Mistress. That ribbon is proof, as it were, that she acknowledges you…or something to that effect, I'm sure. If you don't accept it, I think it would only serve to offend her."

"Mother-in-law…acknowledges me…?"

It was hard to believe after Fuyu had just finished disparaging her so much. Still somewhat dubious, Miyo placed the ribbon on the mirror stand.

"Young Mistress. If you would like, I can tie up your hair with that ribbon after you finish getting dressed."

"Oh…um, well…"

Nae's offer was fantastic. The white ribbon would complement the light purple one-piece dress well.

Still, though, was this really okay? The very person she received it from had repeatedly emphasized to her that it was garbage.

Picking up on Miyo's confusion, Nae smiled faintly.

"While the mistress does have a violent temper and can be harsh toward things she finds displeasing, she is not as mean-hearted down deep as she may appear. It's simply that her indirect way of acting and speaking stands out."

"Indirect, huh…"

"I believe the mistress was deeply impressed when you endeavored to save that man from the village yesterday. Though she didn't say that explicitly herself."

Miyo thought back to what Fuyu had said moments before.

"But that spirit you have of trying to act on Kiyoka's behalf, and that alone*, I suppose I can admit that* maybe *it* might *be worthy of him. Just* barely, *mind you!"*

It was quite a difficult comment to parse, but when she'd calmed down and thought it through, Fuyu had really said she was fine acknowledging Miyo for Kiyoka's sake…or so it sounded.

Wording that was difficult to understand. An unwavering and stubborn personality. Miyo felt a bit like she knew someone who resembled her.

Kiyoka's and Mother's personalities seem a bit similar, don't they?

She couldn't hold back a small giggle.

Back when Miyo had just arrived at Kiyoka's house, there had been times he treated her coldly. Indeed, such rumors about his cold

behavior were spread far and wide. But he was simply clumsy at expressing himself and was, in fact, a very kind man.

Once she understood that, even his occasional curt mannerisms seemed charming to her.

When she considered Fuyu might be the same way, it lightened her heart just a little.

“Young Mistress. We servants all enjoyed attending to you. Therefore, instead of saying good-bye, I hope you’ll come back again in the future.”

It was still faint, like a tiny seed, but she felt some hope yet.

“Yes, definitely.”

After exchanging bright smiles together, Miyo set about getting ready.

Everyone had already gathered in the entryway hall, except for Miyo.

I-I knew it, this is really nerve-racking after all…

Her first Western outfit. Nae complimented her, saying she “looked absolutely stunning,” but when it came time for the big reveal, she couldn’t calm her pounding heart.

Compared to kimonos, Western clothes were shorter in length, with her feet overly exposed to the breeze, making her both extraordinarily uneasy and embarrassed.

As Miyo fidgeted hesitantly, unable to come out from where she was hiding, she heard a voice from behind her.

“What are you doing?”

Such an elegant standing posture could only belong to Fuyu. She had just arrived at the entry hall herself.

“…I’m just nervous.”

“Oh my, then I suppose I’ll need to tack on ‘cowardly’ to the long list of your endless flaws, won’t I?”

“…”

“So you’re actually wearing it. That ribbon.”

“Oh, um, yes.”

Nae had tied her hair together beautifully.

Neatly combed, only the upper part of the hair on the back of her head was tied up, with the lower half being left to flow behind her, in the so-called lady’s knot. Using the white lace ribbon from Fuyu, of course.

“Well, I suppose it does make you somewhat more presentable. Obvious, really, given it once belonged to me.”

“Thank you very much.”

When Miyo expressed her sincere gratitude to Fuyu, she turned away with a firm “I should certainly hope so!”

Then, using the hand that wasn’t holding her fan, she suddenly pushed Miyo forward.

“Ah…”

By unintentionally showing herself in the entry hall, she drew the eyes of everyone gathered there, and her mind went blank.

“Oh my, Miyo looks just as good in Western clothes, doesn’t she?”

The first thing she heard was slightly flippant praise from Tadakiyo.

Both Kiyoka and Arata are staring at me…

When she shifted her gaze, she saw the men looking her way. Miyo’s feet naturally carried her in their direction.

Between the two of them, Arata was the first to speak.

“Miyo. That outfit of yours is absolutely marvelous. Beautiful and charming. I can hardly take my eyes off you.”

“Thank you…”

Her cheeks were on fire. Unconsciously, she fidgeted with her hands, locking her fingers together before quickly untangling them again.

Restlessly shifting her eyes to avoid looking at anyone, she met Kiyoka’s own. When they did, he smiled softly.

“Um, Kiyoka. Wh-what do you…think…?”

“Right. You look great. Very cute.”

The joy, and slight surprise, she felt at his remark made her cheeks grow hotter. She covered her mouth with her hands as it naturally broke into a smile.

C-cute… He called me cute…

She never would’ve thought Kiyoka would tell her something like that.

While she expected him to compliment her, she never expected him to use such a word to do so. It made her so very, very happy.

This must have been what it felt like when people described themselves as walking on air.

“Well now, I never thought I’d hear my straitlaced-to-the-very-core son call someone cute… Fuyu, my dear, there’s no choice but to accept their arrangement now.”

“Don’t ask me. Why, I don’t ever recall raising my son into the type of man who’d compliment women with such an unbecoming grin on his face. A deplorable look for a son of the Empire, truly.”

The hushed conversation about them never reached the betrothed couple’s ears.

Afterward, once they'd finished exchanging formal good-byes, Tadakiyo had some final parting words for each of them.

"Kiyoka, be sure to invite us to the wedding. Fuyu and I will go together."

"If I feel like it."

"And you, Usaba boy. You never got a chance to relax, did you? Feel free to swing by again sometime, do some sightseeing."

"That's very true. Maybe I will come to enjoy your hot springs, then."

"Miyo. Take care of Kiyoka for me."

"I will."

Tadakiyo shouted, "Be sure to keep healthy," as they all got into the automobile, and Miyo heard Kiyoka quietly respond, "You're the one who needs to hear that."

Then, sent off by Tadakiyo dramatically waving his hand good-bye, Miyo, Kiyoka, and Arata made their way back to the capital.

EPILOGUE

The Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit had been split into multiple groups and issued separate missions.

Thanks to the information they'd gleaned from Commander Kiyoka during his field mission, the unit had advanced their investigation into the "Nameless Order"—the Gifted Communion—which had caused the government much concern over the past few days.

Then, because of this, the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit, normally tasked with taking on said Grotesqueries, received another order:

"Immediately neutralize Communion follower activity in the appointed location."

To make matters worse, the coordinates turned out to be the site of an exceptionally powerful stronghold, where several of the Communion's followers were all but confirmed to be operating.

In other words, they would be sending Gifted pawns into battle against Gifted opponents.

Still feeling somewhat unsatisfied by the explanation, Yoshito Godou had brought his subordinates to an abandoned temple on the outskirts of the capital.

"Everyone to their stations!"

At Godou's instructions, four of the group members encircled the temple on all sides.

Right as Godou gave the signal, he and the remaining two men brandished their sabers and rushed inside the temple hall, just as they had previously gone over.

"It's the Imperial Army…! Wait."

Feeling let down, Godou frowned.

The inside of the dilapidated temple hall was completely deserted. According to their information, there should have been several people here during the day at this time, but there wasn't a soul in sight.

They had obviously checked the surrounding area before barging in, but there were no signs that they had sensed Godou's team coming and tried to hide, either.

"Looks like the info was off, Godou… Maybe they just happen to be out?"

"C'mooon, there's no way. I mean, the brass would definitely collect a whole lotta evidence by the time they pass us the information, right? For now, just keep your guard up."

While he answered the subordinate's question, Godou scanned the inside of the hall again, staying alert.

The first thing that drew his attention was the large emblem of the Communion drawn on the wall. This proved that people involved with the religious group had been there, but…

"Could it be…a trap, maybe? But then what kind of trap?"

He mumbled to himself, thinking hard.

But they had already checked for both physical and supernatural traps.

"Godou. We swept the place again but still didn't find anything."

This raised the possibility that their information had been wrong. There was no way their superiors would overlook that mistake in a time of crisis like this.

But hang on a sec… Maybe there's still something we're not seeing here.

At almost the exact moment the thought crossed Godou's mind, he heard a sizzling sound, like something being roasted over fire.

Godou caught a glimpse of something he was positive hadn't been there before—a large, bomb-like object.

"Uh?"

It was a simple device, packed gunpowder fixed with a fuse. One look at its construction, however, was enough to tell him its explosion wasn't going to be small.

And worst of all, the tip of the extended fuse was light orange and swiftly closing in on the bomb itself.

Godou went pale in an instant, then yelled automatically.

"Everyone, barriers up!"

One second later.

With a terrible thundering boom, the abandoned temple was enveloped in an enormous conflagration.

◇◇◇

They had been away for only a few days, yet the bustling noise of the capital that hit them the moment they stepped off the train felt a bit nostalgic.

After being tossed around in their train car for a spell, the three travelers safely disembarked onto the train platform in the imperial capital's central station.

"Peaceful country towns and farming villages are nice, but it feels good to be back in the capital, doesn't it?"

"It does."

Miyo nodded at Arata, whose voice contained a clear note of relief.

Kiyoka, on the other hand, looked at him with suspicion.

“You work for a trading firm, and you’re saying that?”

“*Hah-hah-hah.* It’s true I often end up going from place to place, but my base of operations is still here, you know.”

The messy, bustling capital and friendly conversation. Miyo felt the tension she’d built up over the trip slowly melt away.

However, Kiyoka and Arata’s banter suddenly sank into silence, and a serious look came over them both.

“Things are going to get busy.”

“Indeed.”

The Gifted Communion. Naoshi Usui. As well as the Usuba family’s situation. Problem after problem was piling up.

Surely the days would become hectic from here on out.

Miyo’s expression naturally tightened up, too.

Though her capabilities were limited, she wanted to support them as much as she could. To do that, she couldn’t let herself ignore the matters at hand.

She needed to put even more effort into her Gift training.

As the three made their way through the station crowd, they discussed what they would do from here on out.

“I need to go give my report to Prince Takaihito. But I’m not in much of a rush, so I can see Miyo back home.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

“Yeah, that’d be good if you could. I need to go to the station first and hear from Godou—”

Kiyoka paused unnaturally.

Arata stopped walking, and Miyo also halted to look at the two of them.

She had barely opened her mouth to ask what was wrong when a horrible shiver ran down her spine. She felt goose bumps spread across her skin.

Wh-what's going on…?

She didn't understand it at all, but something was strange.

The crowd of people, the hustle and bustle, were getting farther and farther away. Almost as if the three of them were being isolated from the rest of the world.

Then, the next thing she felt was an unsettling and overpowering sense of dread.

"Is this?"

"Indeed. I'm sensing the Usuba family's Gift."

Although she was relieved to hear the two men's composed voices for the time being, Miyo gagged from the instinctual terror that assailed her.

What in the world was happening? The answer quickly showed itself.

Within the strange space, as if the world had left the three of them behind, a single figure emerged out of thin air to approach them.

"I believe this is the first time I have the pleasure of meeting you. Head of the Kudou family, heir of the Usuba family, as well as…"

—my dear daughter.

Misfortune in human form had appeared before the three of them.

AFTERWORD

Hello, everyone, it's been a long time.

It is I, the author who has earned notoriety since Volume 1 for her difficult-to-write/difficult-to-read/hard-to-remember-in-Japanese pen name—but who has now started to find supportive comments like "it's easy to search for" and "it stands out"—Akumi Agitogi.

Thanks to your support, *My Happy Marriage* has reached its third volume. As the author, I'm so very glad I am able to continue bringing you the story of Miyo and Kiyoka.

Not only that, but in this volume, I went straight for a "To be continued!" type of ending (since there might be some readers who read the afterword first, I'll avoid spoiling anything). Though I was conflicted as to whether that was a good idea…I was still very gung ho about writing it all and had a very fun time with it… Just what will fate have in store for our lead couple, I wonder?

In this volume, I finally got the chance to feature Kiyoka's parents, who I had already thought up relatively early in the series. I feel they're pretty fitting parents for the Kudous, but what do you think?

The Usuba family's situation, the newly appearing enemy organization, and more—problems are still piling on. Will our couple be able to safely reach what's promised in the series title? I'm as excited as you all to find out.

In the meantime, the first volume of the *My Happy Marriage* manga adaptation from Rito Kousaka has been released. It's wonderfully done, so I *strongly* urge you all to check it out! It's serialized in Square Enix's Gangan Online (as of February 2020), so please check it out there, too.

Now, to my editor, for whom I managed to cause nothing but trouble, more than last time, or even the time before that, but who also still put in their absolute maximum effort to support me: I don't even know how I can properly show my gratitude. Thank you so very much.

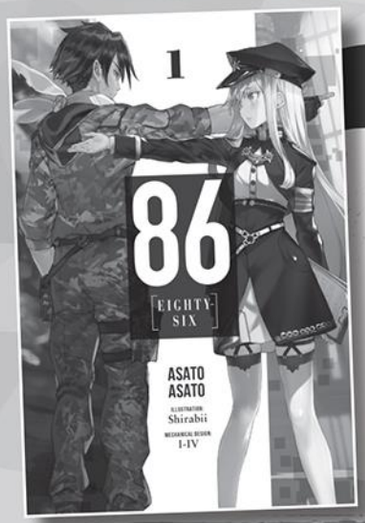
To Tsukiho Tsukioka, and your wonderful work on the cover illustration: I thank you from the bottom of my heart for drawing Miyo and Kiyoka so beautifully that words truly fail me.

And finally, to all the readers who picked up this book and have continued from Volumes 1 and 2: Thank you as always. Volume 3 wouldn't be here without all your support, and I hope you all enjoyed it.

I hope we'll meet yet again.

Akumi Agitogi

HAVE YOU BEEN TURNED ON TO LIGHT NOVELS YET?



86—EIGHTY-SIX, VOL. 1–11

In truth, there is no such thing as a bloodless war. Beyond the fortified walls protecting the eighty-five Republic Sectors lies the "nonexistent" Eighty-Sixth Sector. The young men and women of this forsaken land are branded the Eighty-Six and, stripped of their humanity, pilot "unmanned" weapons into battle...

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WOLF & PARCHMENT, VOL. 1–6

The young man Col dreams of one day joining the holy clergy and departs on a journey from the bathhouse, Spice and Wolf. Winfiel Kingdom's prince has invited him to help correct the sins of the Church. But as his travels begin, Col discovers in his luggage a young girl with a wolf's ears and tail named Myuri who stowed away for the ride!

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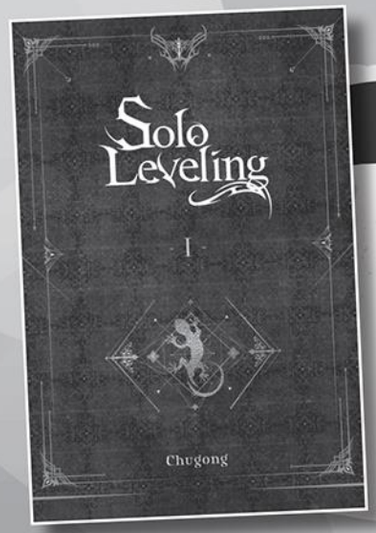

SOLO LEVELING, VOL. 1–5

E-rank hunter Jinwoo Sung has no money, no talent, and no prospects to speak of—and apparently, no luck, either! When he enters a hidden double dungeon one fateful day, he's abandoned by his party and left to die at the hands of some of the most horrific monsters he's ever encountered.

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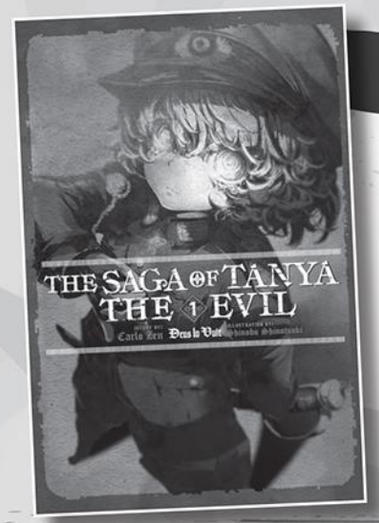

THE SAGA OF TANYA THE EVIL, VOL. 1–10

Reborn as a destitute orphaned girl with nothing to her name but memories of a previous life, Tanya will do whatever it takes to survive, even if it means living life behind the barrel of a gun!

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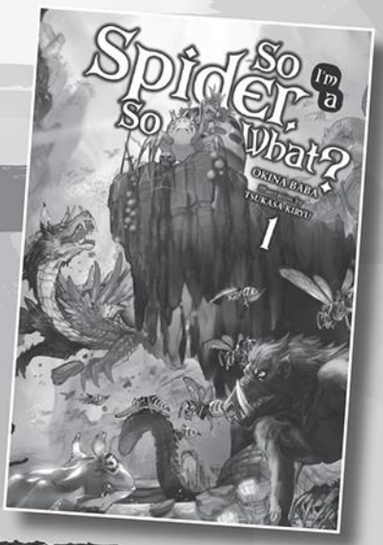

SO I'M A SPIDER, SO WHAT?, VOL. 1–15

I used to be a normal high school girl, but in the blink of an eye, I woke up in a place I've never seen before and—and I was reborn as a spider?!

Manga adaptation available now!

OVERLORD, VOL. 1–14

When Momonga logs in one last time just to be there when the servers go dark, something happens—and suddenly, fantasy is reality. A rogues' gallery of fanatically devoted NPCs is ready to obey his every order, but the world Momonga now inhabits is not the one he remembers.

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